

Poverty & Tradition

a sermon preached on the

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lection: 1 Kings 17:8-16, Psalm 146, Mark 12:38-44

One of the ways in which the early church avoided the idolatrous and often violent so-called 'plain meaning' of Scripture was through their understanding of allegory and symbol. The early church 'fathers' would find the 20th century obsession with the literal interpretation of Scripture incomprehensible. There was a literal meaning, true, but it was only the first of four stages in Biblical interpretation, and to get stuck at this first stage was tantamount to idolatry, because it claimed too much. Their language is for us strange-sounding, employing words like 'anagogical' to describe one of the further stages of interpretation. The vital key to their interpretive method was the movement away from the literal in the direction of the symbolic – ultimately, Scripture could only be understood if it was approached symbolically.

As we approach the end of the liturgical year, in this All Saints tide which propels us into Advent, so marked by what sounds like wild language to us, the language of apocalyptic, this reminder is all the more important. For instance, in today's gospel encounter, on the Tuesday of Holy Week, in the aftermath of fierce contest which has been ensuing all day between Jesus and religious leaders, the Scribes are not merely understood as historical figures, though that is true of course, but as symbols of a dead tradition. Jesus calls people into a living tradition.

That's one way of summarising the entire conflict between Jesus and the prevailing religious establishment. Seen in this way, the wealth of the Scribes, and also the wealth of those who "contribute to the treasury out of their abundance", is not only their material wealth, though that is often the case. I have long been intrigued by the correlation between socio-economic status of a worshipping community and dead tradition – the wealthiest communities, in spite of higher standards of education, strangely harbouring fundamentalism and literalism. Even more intriguing is the fact that the very same communities rarely take literally the Bible's numerous texts about the necessity to shed wealth!

But at a deeper level than external measures, 'wealth' is a symbol of being excessively bound by a revelation of God which is closed – this is dead tradition. At this deeper level, dead tradition knows no socio-economic barriers and besets all of us. The poverty of the woman in today's gospel is not only her obvious material poverty, but symbolises her openness to revelation. Our early church forebears would have immediately recognised the woman and her self-emptying as a symbolic prefiguring of Jesus himself, who in just a few days will stand before the Temple guardians, naked, penniless, supporter-less, poor – who, out of his poverty 'will put in everything he has, all his living'.¹ Jesus also will put in everything he has, all his living. 'Poverty' symbolises powerlessness, a lack of capacity to control and determine. 'Wealth' symbolises our attempt to control and determine, to have power over our world. Wealth shuts down revelation, an idolatrous attempt to restrain God – dead tradition.

Immediately it should become clear to me that this is not merely a story about characters out of first century Palestine, but a story about me! Some part of *me* closes revelation, out of a desire to control and determine. It is that part which has invested everything in a particular way of reading scripture, interpreting doctrine, and categorising people, beginning with myself. What I 'parade in the marketplaces' out of this energy is the external dimensions of what I have pinned my life on. This can take many shapes and forms, according to individual particularity.

¹

Mark 12:44

Common to all, in spite of individual variation, is the making of a temple of our own design. Jesus will shortly tell his disciples, marvelling at wonder of the fine Jerusalem temple, that not one stone of this temple will be left: “All will be thrown down.”² This temple of my own design will be thrown down. My investment in it is the spiritual problem, the barrier which prevents me from entering the kingdom. This is what makes the temple a dead tradition, for it has effectively closed off the way to revelation. The only real justification for the Church’s existence is to assist all people in facing up to and overcoming this universal spiritual problem. When we fail to make this the central task we are a greater obstacle to the kingdom than all the ‘secular’ objects and persons onto which we project our own darkness. Elsewhere in the gospels a somewhat feistier Jesus declares to the religious leaders: “Woe to you... for you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.”³ We ourselves must ‘go in’ – that is, it is not enough merely to know that Jesus has ‘put in all his living’. Whenever we hear the Church using phrases like “once and for all”, or “all things necessary for salvation”, and the like, warning bells should sound, for we are in the courts of the temple of dead tradition – which *will* be thrown down according to Jesus.

Jesus’ warning, especially in Mark’s gospel, could not be clearer. Entering the Kingdom depends upon living tradition. And the conditions of living tradition are detachment from all that we regard as possession – in other words, powerlessness and humility. Indeed, it is only possible to be open to living tradition by such detachment.

In the Eucharist we participate in the tradition which has been handed down to us. Yet, paradoxically, only by detachment from what has been handed down – that is, ‘poverty’ - is it possible to be open to the ongoing revelation of God by the power of the Spirit – who is forming us into the living tradition of the Body of Christ. Eucharist invites us into a voluntary sacrifice of our wealth – in all its many shapes and forms, visible and invisible - that we may be open to receive the riches of the kingdom.

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² Mark 13:2

³ Matthew 23:13