

Ordinary 18

4th August 2019

Readings: Hosea 11:1-11 Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

Reflection

It was early evening – dusk – as we gathered at the table. An eclectic group of eight or nine, meeting together for the first time in preparation for the next day's conference. She was holding forth at the end of the long table, speaking rapidly, loudly about herself – telling her story in quite some detail. Whenever anyone else offered a thought or opinion, she quickly contributed her own, turning all attention back to herself and her achievements.

She came to mind as I reflected on Jesus' parable of the rich fool.

And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'

In the space of three sentences, the rich man uses six 'I's and five 'my's!

It made me think about my own insecurities and thought processes. It invited me to consider what (and who) occupies my daily thoughts and prayers. Is it all about me and my needs and wants? In all honesty – sometimes! But I'm so grateful for the times when other people and circumstances help me to refocus – from 'I and my', to 'we and our'(or 'they and their') – from concerns and worries about the future, to a call back to living in the present; from self-satisfaction to gratitude; from longing to thanksgiving; from accumulation to generosity; from personal treasures, to richness towards God – 'for where your treasure is, there your heart is also'.

Often, it is through encounters with children, that my perspective changes and I re-learn to let go and trust.

Like the recent encounter with a pyjama-clad toddler in a Christchurch Hospital corridor who, as I approached on a particularly cold winter's evening, looked into my face with his huge brown eyes, raised his arms and said one word – "Cuggle?" I reassured his apologetic dad that the encounter had made my day, and as I continued down the corridor, I had the distinct impression that I had cuddled the Divine! The experience also brings to mind today's words from Hosea, where a loving and compassionate God bends down to embrace Israel!

Another encounter that continues to remind me to trust in God's loving presence and provision, happened on the night of February 22nd 2011. When all those gathered in the parish lounge anxiously tried to settle down on the floor and get some sleep in the midst of powerful aftershocks, a baby slept peacefully in her mother's arms – content and secure in her mother's love. The rhythm of that child's breathing helped me to relax into God's love, assured of God's presence whatever was ahead. I gave thanks, and even slept (at least a little!)

Today's gospel story of the rich fool is sandwiched between words of encouragement and comfort – 'Even the hairs on your head are all counted; Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows'; and – 'Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body what you will wear...consider the ravens, they have neither storehouse nor barn....do not keep striving, and do not keep worrying.'

These words of encouragement and comfort are at odds with the 'security' we are sold in today's world of advertising and insurances. Achievements, possessions and insurances are palliatives to which we may cling and feel secure, but they are unable to safeguard our future or to guarantee every success.

Yet, in the parable of the rich fool, it was not the rich man's planning for the future that was a bad thing – we are all called to be good stewards of our resources. No. The rich man's downfall was in his complete

self-absorption – a self-absorption which left no room for others, nor for God. Self-absorption, self-satisfaction, self-indulgence, self-gratification – ‘relax, eat, drink, be merry’

In a sermon entitled *The Impossible Self as Steward*ⁱ, Walter Brueggemann states that ‘Stewardship is not about money, time and talents. It is about the Self who gives or who does not give, how the self is constituted, identified, perceived, presented and situated. Because a self - wrongly constituted, wrongly identified, wrongly perceived, wrongly presented, wrongly situated – will not ever be able to be generous or grateful.’

Often it is when our self, our inner being is called to new growth and new depths, that we feel insecure, stripped of comfortable props, regular routines and satisfying habits. Yet God speaks into all our grasping and clinging, our insecurities and anxieties saying: ‘do not be afraid, do not keep worrying’.

Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae identifies the old self and the new self:

‘Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.’
Col.3:9-10

My conference friend settled over the ensuing days, becoming more comfortable, finding her place and identity, without sense of threat or insecurity. Her storehouse of ‘I’s and ‘my’s diminished and she was able to let go, listening to others, sharing significant information, enhancing our discussions and enlightening our understanding. Her Self transformed and we were all the richer!

Today at St. Mary’s, Addington, the Gradual is a favourite from the Iona Community. The words call us to come, to let go, and live with generous hearts:

Come with me, come wander, come welcome the world
where strangers might smile or where stones may be hurled;
come leave what you cling to, lay down what you clutch
and find, with hands empty, that hearts can hold much.

Refrain: Sing hey for the carpenter leaving his tools!
 Sing hey for the Pharisees leaving their rules!
 Sing hey for the fishermen leaving their nets!
 Sing hey for the people who leave their regrets!

Come leave your possessions, come share out your treasure,
come give and receive without method or measure;
come loose every bond that's resisting the Spirit,
Enabling the earth to be yours to inherit.

May it be so.....

Helen Roud

ⁱ Brueggemann, Walter. *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann*, Vol.2, p272, WJK Press (2015).