

Our Treasure in Christ

Lent 3

March 7th, 2010

Isaiah 55:1-9, Psalm 63:1-9, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:31-35

As we travel our Lenten journey we find that there are recurring themes and questions in the scriptures that guide our path. Those of you who are using the Lenten study materials will probably be discovering that in your groups you are revisiting themes and discussions as the weeks go on.

Our readings today in many ways, echo the final words of the Ash Wednesday gospel reading from Matthew 6: *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (vs19-21)*

As we travel the Lenten road towards Jerusalem, we are challenged to ask ourselves: Where is our treasure? What is of highest value to us? Is our treasure an earthly one or does it reside in our relationship with God?

In both the reading from Isaiah and in Psalm 63 we have the wonderful theme of God's generous hospitality, with images of nurturing, sustaining and the abundance of God's care and grace.

In the Psalm we read: *My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips....in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy....your right hand upholds me. (v5,7,8).*

And in Isaiah we have a moving invitation to God's table: *Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price....eat what is good and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear and come to me; listen, so that you may live. (v1,2,3)*

This nurturing image is also reflected in the reading from Luke's gospel where Jesus likens himself to a mother hen gathering her chicks under the shelter of her wings.

However, both the prophet Isaiah and Luke speak of the tragedy of the unwillingness of God's own people to accept and live within the hospitality and grace of God. Jesus longs to gather the people of God under his wings like a mother hen and yet they reject him. Isaiah asks: *Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?* (v2)

Why indeed. This is a question that each of us must ask ourselves – why do we seek nurture, comfort, life and meaning in superficial things and the false promises of the world, rather than in the deep, life-giving grace of God?

Some reject God outright and close themselves off to any of God's gifts of grace and life. We meet many of these people in the biblical narrative and in our own daily life, and there is a deep sadness and poverty that surrounds them even if they cannot perceive it. We are given a glimpse of the grief God feels when Jesus says: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*(v34).

Others accept God's love and follow in his way, but due to fear, personal ambition, or unmet desires within themselves, end up abusing the hospitality of God. We see this in many of the religious authorities that Jesus encountered and confronted. God's grace is considered something to be earned, something to be jealously guarded from the "wrong" people. They presume God's favour whilst ignoring the heart of God's Law – justice, kindness, mercy, generosity, self-sacrificial love, humility. They become self-righteous, sanctimonious, and pursue their own ambitions in God's name. Lest we get too cocky or judgemental, this is a trap we can find ourselves falling into all too easily.

Many of us, I suspect, do not often find ourselves in these first two categories. Rather, most of us find ourselves unintentionally losing our focus, becoming distracted from the real eternal treasure we have in Christ by the more glamorous, tangible, things of the world. We find ourselves being wooed by worldly success, possessions, the cult of appearance and attractiveness, sex, even technology. We can become enslaved by our work, by the need to be needed and appreciated, even by hobbies that take over our lives. It is so easy for us to begin to believe the lie of modern culture that preaches the virtues of independence, self-actualization, financial power and personal rights because these things sound so reasonable and promise so much. However, this is where we need to really take heed of the voice of Isaiah: *Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?*, and the voice of Jesus in Matthew's gospel: *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (vs19-21).*

There are also some people who find it extremely difficult to accept and live in the hospitality and grace of God because they feel deeply unworthy. Whilst they long to know the joy and peace of God they simply cannot believe that God could love someone like them who so constantly disappoints and has so little to offer.

If this is how you feel, then let me stand beside you.

None of us are worthy or deserving of God's mercy and generosity, the abundance of Christ's love and the cost of his sacrifice for us. That is what makes our relationship with God so profound, so miraculous, and so precious.

Even though God knows exactly who and what we are, with all of our ugliness, darkness, weakness and acts of betrayal, in God's eyes, we are worth it. Christ's love for us is so complete, so insistent, so pure, that not even the threat of violence, rejection and a brutal death could not make him abandon his ministry of healing, love and liberation.

I pray that this Lenten season we would accept the invitation of the Scriptures to live a life of thanksgiving for God's faithfulness to us, and that we would work towards developing an attitude of prayerfulness no matter where we are or in what circumstance we find ourselves. The great themes and practices of Lent can help us to do this: fasting and self-denial, diligence in studying and praying the Scriptures, fostering communion through generosity and hospitality towards others – all of these serve to keep us focussed upon the real treasure – our life-giving relationship with God.

Through prayer, study of the Scriptures and the breaking of bread with one another, we become witnesses to the gospel in the world, and, we nurture an attitude of humility and gratitude that prevents us from abusing or taking for granted the hospitality of God.

Through prayer, study of the Scriptures and the breaking of bread with one another, we are encouraged to become firmly planted in the love and life of Christ and less open to distractions and temptations, and, for those of us who feel so broken, we are able to experience the true healing and wholeness we long for.

May the psalmist's song also become our song of praise and thanksgiving: *My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you upon my bed and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.*

The Lord be with you.