

15 The Price of the Kingdom

12: 13 – 34

A man appealed to him to arbitrate in a family dispute. His brother wasn't properly dividing their inheritance. But Jesus declined to get involved, because there were already those appointed as arbitrators in such matters. For all his outspoken criticism of the local leaders, and for all the authority of his teaching and his proclamation of the rule of God, Jesus did not take on a role that was not given to him. Like the centurion, he understood authority.

But he did have authority to comment on the behavior he saw. The greedy brother (if that was the truth of the matter) should think of the rich man who, after a very prosperous season, decided to retire. His barns were so full he would have to build bigger ones. Life was secure for as long as he might live. He could relax now, take it easy and enjoy himself. That's what property does for you: a bulging bank account, well-performing investments, a generous pension entitlement – you've nothing to worry about. Life is good for those who have what makes life good: property and money. But that kind of security is fools' security, for God's view of the rich man was very different. "This very night your life will be required of you. Who will own your property then?" In the end – and we do not know when that will be – what will count is whether we are rich in the sight of God.

It's important to us to be secure. Our very self depends on it. And we like to think that we know how to make our future secure. After all, we can't survive without the basics, and for each of us the "basics" include all those comforts, privileges and opportunities to which our income has made us accustomed. For a peasant in Burkina Faso security means knowing there will be food each day. For me, security is a Church of England pension as generously endowed as that of the clergy, and some teachers' superannuation. For some of the best-paid officers in business or local government, it's a contract that guarantees a £300,000 pay-off, even if we make a hash of the job and they want to get rid of us. For some, security is knowing that I will not soon starve to death; for others it is knowing that my children are well-provided for, their private school fees and their pony lessons and their cars paid for, their university places guaranteed, and this without jeopardizing my annual holiday abroad. It's all "basic security" and we think we have the right to prioritise such requirements for ourselves and ours.

The trouble is that it takes up so much of our energy and attention, first getting our property, our income and our pensions in place, then living on them and assuring ourselves that they always will be in place. None of the above items, the daily food, the generous pension, the school fees, the holiday (except perhaps the pay-off for incompetent workers) is bad, any more than a well-filled barn is bad. What is bad is the priority we give them, the energy we put into them, the way they preoccupy our thoughts and decide the course of all our actions. Life becomes focused on security, and we fail to secure the values that last in the sight of God. We fail to secure our real selves in face of the one great reality, God.

If I felt smug in writing, or you in reading, about the Pharisees and their love of power and status, this love of security – it becomes a real passion – touches us all. Intensive advertising, in our society, turns it into a positive virtue. But Jesus' teaching is very clear. So clear that it's taken some very diligent counter-measures by Christian apologists to cover it up. "Counsels of perfection" comes to mind. But Jesus was not giving counsels of perfection for those who want to be hermits or nuns or missionaries. He was speaking to all who believe in him and follow him:

That (our need for value in the sight of God) is why I tell you, Don't be worrying about your life – what you're going to eat – or your body – how you're going to clothe it. Your life is much more than food and your body much more than clothing. (12: 22 – 23)

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I want to make a digression here. It's very important. When Luke writes that Jesus said "Don't be worried about your life" he uses the Greek word "psyche". It is also used to mean "soul" and I believe that for Luke there was not such a difference between the two as we have made. Some Greek philosophers had made the "soul" a thing quite distinct from the body, something intellectual and spiritual and able to survive the body, and later Christian thinking developed this view. It became the bedrock of much Christian piety, hope and evangelism. But it was not the way that Israel, or the Hebrew scriptures, saw humanity, and Luke reflects not our theories of the soul but the "Semitic" understanding found in those scriptures.

In all Luke's writing, there is little evidence of interest in or borrowing from Greek philosophy and overwhelming evidence of total immersion in the writings of Israel. The world of Luke's origins was much affected by Greek culture and even more by Greek language, but it was still the Semitic world

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of Syria, Israel and the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. We should be wary of attributing to Luke's report any meanings for "soul" that come from the philosophies either of Plato or of Aristotle. And altho many Christians have only the vaguest notion of Plato or Aristotle, their ideas of the soul were formed by men who were profoundly influenced by those philosophers.

There is even less reason to suppose that Jesus, speaking Aramaic and addressing an audience even less influenced by Greek writing than Luke's mite have been, had in mind our idea of an immortal soul. He is speaking of something in human nature that transcends material needs and limits, a transcendence which is affirmed not as a philosophical proposition but by utter trust in God; but he is not contrasting "soul" and "body". We have only to listen to what he says. We would expect the Christian moralist to say: "Don't be concerned about your body, how to feed and clothe it; think about your soul, which is far more important." But Jesus affirms the body as much as the life or "soul". Just as he says that life is much more than the food with which we supply it, so too the body is much more than the clothes we dress it in. Both are valuable in the sight of God, and he goes on to say that we can expect God to look after them both.

The point is very important in itself, but it is also important for our interpretation of the whole picture given by Luke's gospel. When Matthew gives us this same teaching of Jesus, he puts it at the outset of Jesus' mission to Galilee, as part of a great and challenging section of Jesus' teaching for life as we are to live it in obedience to him¹. Luke, if he did not know Matthew's gospel itself, had a large part of its material available to him in some other document.² But he has placed this particular teaching separately, in a deliberate context: that of the coming of the Son of Man.

Having encountered the determined opposition of the Pharisees and legal experts, as we saw in our previous chapter, Jesus warned his followers to expect a good deal of the same, and to be redy to speak up, courageously and confident in God, in the face of opposition. Anyone who declares themself for Jesus in this way, will find that when the Son of Man comes at the end of history, for the judgement of the world, he will declare himself for them, before God.

Then, as Luke arranges it,³ he goes on to speak of being redy for death, by making sure of our value before God insted of investing it in property. He

¹ The "Sermon on the Mount" Matthew 5 - 7

² Nicknamed "Q" for Quelle, Source

³ 12: 13 - 13: 35

speaks of trust in God for all our needs, of storing up a real treasure “in heaven”, of being ready, in a very committed and active sense, for “the Master’s return”; of recognising the time of crisis in which we live and its urgent opportunity for repentance; of the coming of the kingdom of God and the consequent judgement upon Israel, upon Israel’s rulers and upon Jerusalem itself.

Clearly, we are dealing with the “last things”, that is, the final events and ultimate realities that are the goal of all our lives and the final judgement upon their significance. But these “last things” are not quite as we would expect them (at least if we are influenced by traditional Christian categories) the immortal soul, hell, heaven. Instead, they are courage in a world of powerful opposition, complete reliance on God for our physical and spiritual life, recognition of the ultimate crisis, in which we already stand, and its imminent enactment in Jerusalem. It is that present courage which will be vindicated in the final judgment, it is that utter reliance on God now which is already treasure in the eternal realm of God. The coming of the kingdom is not broken up into a million individual events, one for each individual soul when it reaches death, nor is it waiting for a great stage entry, at present indefinitely postponed. The crisis, the kingdom, the choices and the opportunities of ultimate reality have already broken upon human history, upon Israel, upon Jerusalem, the city to which Jesus is now making his way.

Within this picture, it is possible, for those who find it makes sense, to develop ideas of the immortal soul going to heaven or hell in the way we traditionally picture it, and Luke’s language will lend us some help in this direction. But we must not let those pictures take over. If we do, we end up distorting Luke’s gospel and holding on to a Christian faith that either abandons the gospel for power in the world or abandons the world for an imaginary salvation elsewhere.

It is part of the great heresy into which we have fallen. Perhaps I need to remind you that by “heresy” I don’t mean total falsehood and devices of the imagination, but something that borrows a great deal from the truth, leaving out only an essential element, so that what we end up with is distortion. What we leave out here is the immediacy – physical, temporal, spiritual and eternal – that binds the coming of the kingdom to the present events of society, to its present physical and eternal history, to Galilee, to Jerusalem, to Darfur and to Washington in the 21st century.

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We are to trust in God. Think of the birds that claim our rooftops or forage in the garden. They just take what they find, without making elaborate plans and worrying about the future. God provides what they need. Or look at the wild plants that flower in spring and summer, beautifully decked out as God arranges it, without need for them to work at weaving and sewing. Jesus considers that the finest robes of Solomon are not a match for the beauty of the flowers. (I think this is the only place in the gospel where we are shown Jesus' appreciation of the beauty of "nature".)

A parable is ment to open our eyes to a new way of seeing things; it's not a proof by analogy. We know, of course, that in reality birds do starve, and so do people. But knowing such things does not change the picture Jesus is giving us. There are crises and famines, and proper, vigorous action must be taken to prepare for them or prevent them (as Joseph had told Pharaoh in a story Jesus knew).⁴ But such planning is very different from a constant anxiety that puts us in a state of worry about ourselves all the time, so that in fact we don't do the sensible and careful things we should be taking in hand.

Trust in God in fact frees us to know what we really need to do, not in a panic of self-preservation but in calm, determined action for the needs of many others. A great deal of the poverty and hunger in our world is due to our inability to realise, decades ago, that we had reached a level of material prosperity (in Western Europe, North America and Australia) where we did not need to protect ourselves any further, but could afford to devote our energies to raising the standard of living in the poorer parts of the world we had too long exploited.

Insted of doing that, we let ourselves be persuaded by a dedicated advertising industry that there were always more and more things without which life would be intolerable, and which must be made secure for now and for the future. We have got to the point where governments worry if consumers don't spend, and the naked greed of power-hungry corporations is easily passed off as prudent care for our national interests and investments.

This is one of those points where we have failed to speak up for Jesus. We have let the experts tell us that Jesus' "ideal" is not practical for the world we actually live in, and we, without a murmur, agree with them. We tell ourselves that Jesus' words apply only to the ultimate future, or to our private lives, where they won't prevent us from vigorously opposing any

⁴ Genesis 41: 14 - 49

changes in economic policy that mite reduce our advantages. Whatever the government does to help the poor, it must be done in some other way than thru our pockets; and we're quite redy to speak up about that.

Jesus tells us not to set our hearts on things to eat and drink, or clothes in fashion or computer games or fast cars (or big, neibor-impressing cars) or a bigger, smarter home with a morgage to do justice to our income and our aspirations. But the world insists that we are to set our hearts on these and many other things and to morgage our futures for them; and increasingly the helth of our economy is made dependent on our doing so.⁵ But Jesus tells us to do no such thing; we are to set our hearts on the kingdom of God.

Here again, we miss the point if we think it means postponing our desire into that future which is after death, counting on the rewards which will accrue to us then. That mite be part of it, but it is not the most relevant part to what Jesus is saying here. We are to set our hearts on the kingdom. That's the kingdom which Jesus has been telling us is alrely making its impact among us, whose rules he is alrely putting forward as our way of life, now.

It's not a matter of giving up present possessions in expectation of a much better possession in the future world. The kingdom is not a possession at all, but an absolutely better mode of existence, and one that is alrely beginning. We are not to sit smugly thinking of the rewards that await us in a better life hereafter, however much it may be true that our life will be better, much better, hereafter. But alrely, now, the gift is given us of living in the kingdom of God.

Jesus tells us: "Don't be worrying about all that rigmarole. Your Father knows what you need. Set your hearts on God's kingdom, and everything else will come to you as well. Don't be afraid little flock, for it is your Father's joy to give you the kingdom."

It's like that extraordinary statement about prayer. We are to ask to be rulers and leaders. Desiring, setting our hearts on, the kingdom is something quite different from projecting our desires into another world. It is to desire the coming of the kingdom in this world and life, where it alrely makes itself felt, where it is challenged and we must answer the challenge, because we are followers of Jesus and children of God. It is to pray as we have been taut, "Your kingdom come," knowing as we do so that this is not a

⁵ This paragraph was written a few months before the collapse of US morgage debts in 2008.

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private gift for individuals but the very fulfilment of everything that is relational, social, political, global. It is God's rule over the world, in which we enter into the salvation intended for Israel and for all the nations, from the first promise to Abraham. You cannot possibly separate it from politics, economics, human relations, love. If we desire the kingdom, we cannot possibly fail to speak up for the kingdom against the opposition of our most powerful, and most beloved, nations. That is how we are disciples of Jesus.

"Don't be afraid little flock, it is your Father's joy to give you the kingdom." Most of us like to stop there. But Jesus has something quite specific in mind for us not to be afraid of: "Sell your possessions and give your wealth to the poor." Get a wallet that won't wear out, investments in heaven that don't ever let you down, an account that's safe from thieves and hackers, funds that won't be eaten away with inflation. For where your wealth is, that's where your heart will be.

Unfortunately, we are afraid: of what the kingdom might mean, of even trying out what Jesus is telling us. We are afraid of insecurity, of naive extremism, of ridicule, of doing it only to find that it doesn't work. We're not afraid to believe in heaven after death, even to put "all" our hope in that future life, but we guard ourselves against any pressure to do in this present life anything as dangerous as Jesus is suggesting. Possessions and wealth are necessary, and we will not rashly let them go.

But Jesus is not talking about a kingdom of heaven to be found only after death, in realms beyond the sky. He certainly saw beyond death, beyond his own death and the deaths of his followers and knew that the love of God reaches all the way, but he is talking of the kingdom he had already announced in Nazareth: "Today the prophecies have been fulfilled."

We are to believe in the kingdom of heaven, and to put all our store in it, as something already breaking into our history, already offering its opportunities and challenges, in which God has already marked out a role for us. It's less like having money in the bank to be drawn on when we retire, and more like having our investment in an exciting new enterprise which, altho not yet producing all its profits, is beginning to take off, with prospects, for those who can see it, that are absolutely brilliant.

In fact, Jesus goes on to talk not about us going to heaven, but about the master or the "Son of Man" coming to us, and about a task to be accomplished here on earth. It is in this context that he tells us to put our investment in heaven, not pie in the sky, but the very project of God, heaven in the person of the Son of Man, about to come among us.

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One reason we are afraid of Jesus' teaching is that we've forgotten how to respond to it as teaching. It is not Law. Demanding tho it is, and non-negotiable, Jesus does not present us with law, but with teaching for disciples. Laws are prescribed and given to a people who can be expected to carry them out. You do as the laws require, or you can expect to be punished. But when you obey a teacher, you are, by definition, learning. You are being shown how to do something that has hitherto been beyond your knowledge and power, and you have to practice. If you trust a teacher – and Jesus is a teacher – you try, you set out to do what they tell you. And it's not surprising if at first you're very nervous, and you get it wrong and have to try again. It may be some time before you learn to live out what you have been taut. When Jesus is your teacher, it may be that a lifetime will find you still learning.

The question, therefore, is not: Have we obeyed the law? but: Do we trust him enuf to keep on trying, knowing that this is what he teaches us? For most of us, Jesus' teaching about money and property is the bit we find altogether too hard. So we ignore it, or we try to explain it away. We ignore it most successfully by distracting ourselves, for instance telling ourselves that we are saved "by faith alone" and never asking how we can have faith in Jesus if we don't accept his teaching. Or we try to explain it away by saying that Jesus envisaged an imminent end of the world, with no need to plan for very much future (forgetting that Luke reports the teaching two generations later, and is convinced of its validity still). Or we explain it as "counsels of perfection" for those who want to go further than is absolutely required. Or (in the Catholic tradition) we institutionalise the response to this teaching, making it a rule for those who join a religious order, so that we can tell ourselves that Jesus never really ment it for everybody.

Insted of that, we should be cheerfully and boldly willing to have a go. That's the attitude for good learners. If Jesus says "Give your possessions to the poor" and we don't know how to do it, (How many of my possessions? How far do I go? Do I sell my house? My family's home? Do I, like Francis of Assisi, abandon everything, leaving even my clothes behind?) the best way to learn is to start. I don't know, yet, which or how many of my possessions I should sell. Presumably not such things as the house I live in or the clothes I wear or the food my family eats; but we mite sell the family car and buy bicycles, and give the difference to the poor. The fact is, we don't know how far the selling and giving will go – and anyway, how do I know which poor to give the proceeds to? We are learning, and the important thing is to be open to our teacher, to go further than we thought we could (that's how

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we learn) and to trust God, for God, who is directing us into this path of salvation, will show us how to work out the details. And God, who wants to give us the kingdom, will show us where the next challenge lies.

We are to put ourselves and the things we own at God's disposal – but that means really at God's disposal, not just theoretically or “in principle”. Some of our possessions we will give up at once, and Jesus will teach us to do without the things that we now think indispensable. He will break the ropes that tie us to our possessions and show us, one by one perhaps, how to give them away. That is what we must be prepared for, if we are to receive the kingdom as his disciples. If it were a law, we could hope to fulfil the law and so to acquit ourselves. We could measure what the law requires, and when we had done that much, we could draw the line and stop. We have done our duty. But because it is teaching, and Jesus is teaching us, we can only accept it in faith, trusting him, not knowing how far it will go in the end, but more than willing to let him show us, and to take the first steps that are already before our feet.

We must be under no illusions. The teaching of Jesus is attractive and many would like to follow him. The idea of the kingdom of God coming among us is attractive and many would like to see it happen, and many would like to join him in proclaiming the kingdom. But those who do will find that much is required of them. Not that they should find resources and abilities in themselves to contribute to the work of the kingdom – quite the opposite: they must be prepared to give up all that they consider important to themselves: their position, their possessions, their resources, their families, their lives, in order to receive the resources God wants to give them. God has big plans for us.