

Year C, Proper 12 (31 July 2013)

Genesis 18: 20 - 32; Luke 11: 1 - 13

St Philip's, Earl's Court Road

Those of us drawn to the spiritual life can find it a refuge, a place of refreshment, of inspiration and of hope, when so much of our lives are often lacking in these things.

So it's important for us that what happens in church is different from what happens in the rest of our lives. When we hear of churches that talk of little but social action, we might admire what they're doing, but wonder what makes them different from some secular social charity. When the language used at church is no different from that used where we work, we wonder what is distinctive and potentially transformative about the Christian gospel.

Yet if the language we use in church has no connection with the rest of our lives, it's no longer just a refuge: it's become an escape. And if our focus on the spiritual life and on worship of God has no impact on the rest of our lives, on the wider world, it loses sight of the central Christian vision of the kingdom of God: the redemption and transformation, not of some other world, but of the one we live in.

When we listen to the words of Jesus, his talk isn't mostly about angels or heaven.

Instead he talks about divided families and runaway sons; about the victims of crime and who bothers to care for them; about the working conditions of labourers in the vineyards; about those who run businesses and how they delegate their responsibilities when they're away; about the storage of crops; about housekeeping; about wedding banquets; about farmers sowing their fields; about the building of houses; about providing enough light inside a house; about running out of food when the stores are closed; about dogs waiting to catch crumbs under the table; about birds and flowers.

In each case Jesus is using everyday life to teach us about God, about the spiritual life. Two important things follow. First, this deepens and enriches our spiritual life by filling it with stories and pictures drawn from the whole of our lives. It brings body, substance, flesh to a part of our lives which can so easily become ethereal, cut off from the reality of the lives we live.

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And second, at the same time it potentially changes our everyday life. If we are told that God is like a shepherd who cares for every one of his hundred sheep and will leave the flock to go looking for just one lost sheep, that not only shapes our picture of God. It can also transform the art of shepherding, Once a shepherd knows that Jesus takes him seriously enough to use him as a picture of God; and once he knows how God would behave as a shepherd, then things are likely to change.

Throughout the Bible, central religious ideas owe much of their power to their roots in everyday life. 'Redemption' - such a religious word you might think. But it started out as simply the recovery of something pawned or mortgaged. For a slave, that could be their very life. This is what God wants for us. He wants to recover us, to free us. But we can turn that on its head. Once we start using this language of freedom and recovery to describe our religious destiny, it changes the original word, changes its original impact. Now it becomes more important to try to find recovery and freedom - to seek redemption - in the rest of life.

But sadly much of this is lost once the religious meaning of the word takes over, and its origins are lost in time. And so 'redemption' becomes a special piece of religious language, the very opposite of what it was meant to be.

We seem to be especially keen to forget the origins of our religious words when they come from the world of finance or economics. We are keen to keep money away from faith.

There's an interesting example in our gospel reading this morning from Luke Chapter 11. Right at the heart of the Lord's Prayer - in Luke's version - are these words:

'forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.'

This image of debt is present even more clearly in a second version in Matthew's Gospel, which says:

'forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.'

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So why is this image missing from **our** version of the Lord's Prayer?

The word 'debts' was used in the first English version of the Bible in 1395 - by John Wycliff. But in 1526, William Tyndale's translation replaced the word 'debts', with 'trespasses', a word not found at all in the original text of the prayer. The first English Prayer Book followed likewise in 1549 and the rest is history.

It's possible that what we've lost is an ambiguity in the original Aramaic word used by Jesus, an ambiguity which helps Jesus to be talking on two levels, about two different but related things. If so, our English translations fail to capture this double meaning. Interestingly, Aramaic is not the only language where words can mean both debt and sin, and the German translation of the prayer manages to catch this with its word 'schuld', which can mean 'guilt' or 'debt'.

So how might it affect our faith to use debt as a way of understanding our relationship with God?

And how might it affect our view of debt? You may have heard that the Archbishop of Canterbury has suggested one way this week. The market for debt is not working he says - there is clearly not enough competition and so lenders are making huge profits. He's suggested that churches have some of the resources needed by credit unions - buildings and resources particularly.

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, the people of Israel are commanded not to charge interest if they lend money to a fellow Israelite. Charging interest on loans continued to be seen as sinful by Christianity up to medieval Europe, as it still is by Islam in some parts of the world. Taking advantage of someone else's misfortune and benefitting from it is seen as a sin.

Since medieval times the development of capitalism has depended on the availability of credit to finance investment and most of us rely on credit for major personal investments like our homes and our cars. And so the church has changed its view on charging interest. But it should be quite clear that the exploitation of those in need by loan sharks is an evil. And this week the Archbishop of Canterbury went further: even well-

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run respectable organisations are charging too much and need more competition.

And by his words in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus puts these issues of debt right at the heart of our spiritual lives, our relationship with God. Our behaviour towards others should be shaped by our experience of God. And our experience of God is that although we are indebted to him, he frees us from our debts, redeems them and us and sets us free. As individuals and as a church, we should be encouraging and helping others to become free from being in the power of those who want to benefit from their misfortune. We have a duty to be agents of redemption and liberation.

'forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.'