

THE SERVING MASTER

The authority of table service

Luke 12.32-40

Introduction

Perhaps our most common experience in the western world is anxiety. The world in which we live thrives on people being anxious, setting higher and higher goals for themselves and those around them, so that they worry every day about whether they can ever reach them. If they have they will seek something new to be anxious about. If they don't reach those goals, then they have failed.

So powerful a force is this model that some use anxiety as a political, social or economic weapon; think of the anxieties generated by politicians and economists around retirement and old age; think our personal and national security, think financial scams that promise to solve all our anxieties; think climate change.

And how many more; body image, work insecurity,

In fact this week I heard that we have found a new anxiety syndrome; FOMOS the fear of missing out on something.

Anxiety of all kinds certainly walks beside us and it has one effect. It stops creativity and risk-taking in its tracks.

But it has always been thus throughout recorded history. And Jesus spoke about it often. Fear and anxiety deny oxygen to faith and its risks. Fear and anxiety slowly strangle the life out of the kingdom. We pray 'Your kingdom come' and hear its death rattle just below the clamour of our anxieties.

I know it well.

In last week's parable the rich fool thought wealth could be used to alleviate anxiety and provide security and joy. After all wealth is an instrument of power, of status, of joy, of security. It is the mighty meaning giver.

In today's Gospel, in a stunning insight, Jesus turns from the rich fool whom we can all censure and turns to disciples and begins to teach about anxiety. He touches the disciples deepest fears. Without wealth what shall we be or do? It is a very modern question for those who live in the age of anxiety.

This teaching really is about the clash of two worlds and the one Jesus represents is God's, which will one day colonise our sphere completely.

That is what Abraham and the heroes of faith looked forward to and Isaiah and the psalmists longed for. Look at that Hebrews 11 passage we read this morning about Abraham and Moses. Figure they weren't anxious. But faith made them risk-takers; From the Tigris to

goodness knows where and from a cushy job as an Egyptian prince to the desert with a bunch of whingers to look after and not much to do it with!

Radical discipleship-The empire where God and people are central, not goods (32-34)

We pick up the teaching of Jesus with the pivotal verse 32. In verse 31 the disciples are told to continually seek the kingdom (God's rule in their lives and the blessings that come from that) rather than goods.

The kingdom of God is about God's loving rule sweeping the world with love and power, so that human beings, each made in the image of God and each one loved dearly, may relax in the knowledge that this God is in control.

Now they are told that the same rule of God combats their fears about security. They may be a small flock of no great power but God gives them his great gift; the blessings of his sovereign rule.

The kingdom of God brings the values and priorities of God himself to bear on the anxiety and greed that envelops the world (33-34). So therefore it centres on people and thus we read the alarming command to sell our possessions and give alms.

In the Acts, also written by Luke, we note that many Christians lived in their homes with their goods around them and were not regarded

as second-class or rebellious members of God's people. Some did sell everything, but not all. Jesus is reminding us of the man who called out from the crowd, that he should compel his brother to divide the inheritance with him. What we saw there was greed and possession at any cost, the highest cost being the breakdown and annihilation of brotherly relations over money.

What he was asking them to discover was that the antidote to anxiety is devotion to providing for the needs of others; we either grasp or give and, if we grasp, we find anxiety and fear are the consequence.

Following Jesus should make us the freest persons. We have purses that will never wear out because God's blessings never ceases as we give unstintingly to others. This is the economy of the kingdom.

But there are other elements of the economy of the kingdom that are important too.

Radical discipleship-a new kind of empire where the great serve the least

The gospel also speaks of a great coming crisis, which will come in the life of the disciples (35-40) and the world. The Son of Man will come as judge even though in the present circumstances that seems not only unlikely but laughable. Being liberated from the perils of

possessions the disciples can now be ready for the great events that will unfold. And the next two parables illuminate that.

Luke's story is set in a Roman household. They are to have their loins girded ready for action like anyone who, in the ancient world, worked outdoors. Flowing robes are not much help. Tuck the robe in the girdle so that it works like a pair of shorts and you are ready.

Of course every one of Jesus' listeners remembered such a command given to their ancestors in (Exodus 12.11) as for they readied themselves for the Passover, and to journey with their liberating God.

In this story they are to light lamps too, watchful and ready in the darkness as they wait for the lord to come home. The timing of the return is uncertain, it is after all a late party and it might end at midnight or 5am.

And they must be faithful as household servants. Faithfulness in waiting and watching is rewarded by a stunning reversal when the lord returns home: the lord serves the servants (Luke 1.46-55) even after a very long night. This is the political economy of the empire of God. The Master serves the slaves. Whoever heard of such a thing?

Can you see what a threat this is to Caesar's empire and to the economy of the ancient world? And can you how it deals with

anxiety and fear. In God's empire the master serves the slaves. What is to anxious about?

But more, the Master serves the slaves on a cross. God serves the lowest elements of society, those whom others abuse and use, despise and ridicule, the vulnerable and the powerless, from a cross.

This is power in God's empire; the service of justice and love.

Remember the words we read from Isaiah this morning.

'...cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.'

That is the Master on the cross; that is the serving master. Herein lies the authority of the master who serves at table. Can you now understand God's hot despising of the hypocritical worship that Isaiah recounts that represents the opposite?

Radical discipleship-a new kind of empire in which we wait for the crucified

The second parable is a warning emphasising that some may not be ready for the coming of the Son of man. It underscores the

uncertainty from our point of view of God's timing of the great events of God's rule and encourages preparedness.

Which great events are these? The form of the question betrays our particular way of thinking of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, the coming of the Spirit, the mission of the church, the destruction of the Temple, and coming of the Son of man as judge as discrete 'events'.

Among New Testament authors they are seen as elements of one great event. God is on the move to save in all of these events and being ready and watchful is simply the daily exercise of Christian people discerning and following God's sovereign rule in salvation and judgment.

Another way we must view these words in Jesus' ministry is that Jesus thinks the Israel's God is coming back to Zion as promised, indeed is in Zion now, in his ministry. But Israel is not awake. God's return has sneaked up on them and they are not ready; they are not tuned in.

Disciples need to be awake as much as Israel. God's comings are always a surprise, not only in timing but in manner. Christian discipleship is sharpening up our capacities to pay attention.

Conclusion

For instance where is God's 'coming' in the present crisis of the church in Australia? I never hear anyone ask that question. I attended a clergy conference earlier this year and heard no Christian leader raise the question or even posit the idea that it might be worth pursuing.

Remember that the word crisis come from the word in Greek for judgement. And judgment in this instance is God's brick wall. We slam into it and come to a shuddering and painful halt. All I notice is leaders running up and down the wall trying to find a way around it.

Where is God's coming?