

Leaving the Place Better Than You Found It

18 September 2022

Reading: Luke 16:1-13

Loving God, open the scriptures to us in a fresh and exciting way. In Jesus name. Amen

The rich man turns to the manager, "What is this I hear about you? Give me an account for your management."

The famous story is told of a very rich man who was mistakenly reported in the newspaper as being dead. It could be quite sobering reading that over your porridge. What shocked him most wasn't that they had wrongly reported his death, rather it was the heading. It read: Merchant of Death Dies. The obituary went on to explain how he had made lots of money selling dynamite to warring parties. So horrified was he that he spent the rest of his life using his money to promote not death, but peace. We know him as Alfred Noble and his lasting legacy is of course the Nobel Peace Prize. Oscar Wilde also read his death notice in the paper and wrote that the news of his demise had been somewhat exaggerated.

The reading invites us to answer for ourselves the question the rich man asks of his manager, "Give an account of yourself." To try and make men of us boys at school they would take us away on camp. They took us out into the wilderness of Strath Taieri on the way to Middlemarch and gave us the bare essentials of life. My job was to dig the toilets and pretty pathetic they were too. After we had camped out for a few days, the head teacher would come and inspect the camp site. He was coming as he said, to make sure we had left it better than we found it. I'll come back to this in a moment.

Today's Gospel can seem odd. A rich man has a manager. The manager is accused of squandering the property of the rich man. So, the rich man summons the manager to give an account of himself. The manager realises that he has been found out, so he discounts the debts of the rich man's borrowers. The rich man praises this action and so in turn does Jesus.

It can sound like Jesus is praising dishonesty. But the first hearers of this parable would have known what we might miss. The manager would have been taking his own cut. Rounding up the debt and making a handsome bit on the side. What the manager does by discounting the debt each time is take his cut out each time. Changing him from a dishonest manager to an honest one. This is what Jesus praises. No longer is he making money at the expense of others, especially the poor, but only asking for what was rightfully owed. It's a question of trust.

What does this mean for us? Well, can Jesus trust us to use what we have been given to make this a better place? At the end of our lives can we say honestly that we left this place better than how we found it.

This last week the world has been forced to say goodbye to Queen Elizabeth. For most of us we have never known another head of state. It was like she was always there. Can she be said to have left this place better than when she found it. When she ascended the throne, Britain was just recovering from the war. The empire that it had once enjoyed was quickly disappearing. What was to emerge was to be the Queen's greatest achievement. The Commonwealth, of which New Zealand is a proud and founding member, she dedicated her life to promoting. Some things you may not realize about the Commonwealth. Today 2.5 billion people, or one third of all humanity make up the Commonwealth. That is 56 countries and 60% of its members are under the age of 29. They are not all ex-British colonies as you might imagine. Some have joined with no history of British rule. Many are amongst the poorest nations in the world. Many are republics or have their own monarchs. In other words, it is a family of nations like no other. It is held together by bonds of affection and working for each other's good. Even if the Queen had done nothing else, and she certainly did, then this alone would have been an enormous achievement.

On reflection could we say she has left the campsite of the world a better place for having been part of it. The answer must be a resounding yes.

But what of us? What is going to be our lasting legacy? No one is expecting us to reach out to 2.5 billion people, but are we leaving the campsite a better place than we found it?

Each of us has been given a unique set of talents and gifts. Christian maturity is to unashamedly say, "Yes I am good at that." New Zealanders are very bad at admitting that we are good at anything. Christian maturity is also freely admitting what we are bad at, and letting others get on with that. Interviewed on his deathbed Anthony de Mello, a Jesuit priest, reflected:

When I was young, I was a revolutionary and all my prayer to God was "Lord, give me the energy to change the world."

As I approached middle age and realized that half my life was gone without changing a single soul, I changed my prayer to "Lord, give me the grace to change all those I come in contact with. Just my family and friends and I shall be content."

Now that I am an old man my days are numbered, my one prayer is "Lord give me the grace to change myself." If I had prayed for this right from the start, I should not have wasted my life.

If we want a fairer world, let us be fair
If we want a kinder world, let us be kind,
If we want the earth to be renewed in beauty, let us renew it with beauty,
If we want the world to be at peace, let us be at peace,
If we want a world where all are valued, let us treat others with equal value,
If we want a loving world, let us not give into fear or hatred of any kind.

In other words, let us become the change we want to see in our world. When this is our prayer then we will, like the Queen, leave it a better place than where we found it.