

11 October 2009

Sunday 28B

Sermon notes on Mark 10.17-31

[Rev Dr Craig Thompson]

Auburn and Kew UCA

Available from www.auburnuc.org.au and
www.kew.unitingchurch.org.au

In a marvelous little book called *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes the following observation:

"God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who fashion a visionary ideal of community demand that it be realized by God, by others, and by themselves.

They enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge the fellowship and God himself accordingly... They act as if they are the creators of the Christian community, as if their dream binds people together.

When their ideal picture is destroyed, they see the community going to smash. So they become, first accusers of the fellowship, then accusers of God, and finally the despairing accusers of themselves." (SCM 1954, 17f)

We are here today, of course, to worship God. But we've gathered in *this* way today for two reasons. In the first place, we here at Kew wanted to return something of the hospitality we've enjoyed over the last few months on account of these changes to our building, and to show what it is we've been up to – as incomplete as it still is.

But a little more pressingly, the Kew congregation has rather suddenly found itself considering a very different future to what we had anticipated, and we suspect that that difference may

involve the congregations at East Kew, or West Hawthorn, or others. Now, this thinking involves a kind of "visioning", and that is dangerous stuff, if we are to believe Bonhoeffer.

We are all very well aware of the cultural context within which we operate as churches these days, and the impact that context has had on us. Most of us are well able to do the calculations typically done in of congregations like ours, seeking to give an image of what the future looks like, and we all know that it usually looks pretty bleak on that assessment. And so we adopt a stance or a mindset in the face of these apparent "facts". We develop excitements or anxieties, enthusiasms or trepidations, about the options before us. Some of us dream of what we have, or have had. Some of us dream of what might yet be, if we were to move into some quite different future. In either case we are visionaries looking to the left or the right, forward or backward, up or down.

And we Bonhoeffer suggesting to us that God hates visionary dreaming. Well-intended as it may be, such dreaming itself may subvert what we hope for – which, in the end, is always the hope for God and for our true selves. A choice for business-as-usual in the future may simply be the manifestation of a delusion about our prospects; a radical vision for change may prove to be nothing more than a mirage.

While this sounds very pessimistic it is intended simply to be realistic. The best of intentions and the most earnest desire for the future may cause all the

wheels fall off – not only if the earnest desire is to keep things more or less as they were, but also if it is to bring about a radical change.

But the point is not simply that what we face is difficult and fraught with logistical problems. In truth, it is *by the grace of God* that our dreams and visions will fail and be cast aside. If I see the goal, if I know what must be done to achieve it, and if I actually have the means to pull it off, then I will work to bring the vision to reality. And I will do this “no matter what”, for I will believe it also to be God’s vision, and that will require my all. I may have the numbers to force the decision through the processes and meetings. I may have the money to “buy” support for my vision. I may have the sheer energy to cajole and wear down the opposition. I may have the loudest voice or the sneakiest politics. Or I may only have the power to threaten to leave if it doesn’t go the way I think it should. And all this is the case whether I would like to see things stay the same, or not. Yet there is a violence in all this *drive* to make changes. Bonhoeffer says to us: God breaks such visions on the sharp rocks of his grace, because it is not our exercise of our power to influence which brings the kingdom of God, but God himself; whatever God does among us, it is not violent.

To quote again from his little book:

God “does not abandon us to rapturous experiences and lofty moods that come over us like a dream. God is not the God of the emotions but the God of truth...”

A community ... which insists upon keeping its illusion when it should be shattered, permanently loses in that moment the promise of Christian community...

Every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive.

Those who love their dream of a community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of the community, even though their intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and faithful. (LT 17)

We might say after Jeremiah – God is the potter, and the pot does not determine its own shape.

Our gospel reading this morning is a very well known one. A man approaches Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. It turns out that he has lived an upright life, to which Jesus adds just one more requirement, that he give away all that he has, and comes to follow Jesus. This is more than the man can bear and he leaves, “grieving”. This is one of those “squirmy” readings which makes uncomfortable those of us who have many things, for it is not clear – was this a message for that man only, or for us also?

Now, I’m not actually going to focus on that question as such this morning, but if we are still made anxious by what Jesus says here, perhaps there will yet be a word of hope for us to hear, whether it involves keeping what we have or not! I want rather to focus on the “vision” which the man has as he approaches Jesus: the vision of “eternal life” – a vision of a type of life with God. By itself this is not yet a problem. But the man also links what he desires (and needs) to the question, “What must *I do*?” He assumes that he is responsible for achieving the thing

he desires. And so the conversation between him and Jesus focuses on what the man has done, and might yet have to do. This goes very well until Jesus “ups the ante”, finding the thing which cannot be done – even the disciples are horrified – and leaving the man’s vision and hopes in tatters.

But is there not a strange irony in what this man asks for, for in fact one does not *earn* an inheritance. We earn *wages* but inheritance – certainly in Jesus’ cultural context – comes by virtue of being a *son*. Not what you *do*, but what you *are*, is the grounds for being positioned to inherit. With this man’s particular vision and his presumption about the means towards seeing that vision fulfilled, what he most desires is lost, and he who desires it is lost also.

Now, I’ve put before you two basic thoughts. The first is Bonhoeffer’s warning against dreams and visions for the Christian community, and the second is the confusion in the question of the rich man standing before Jesus. What have these two to do with each other?

We, as congregations, are aware of what the future seems to look like, and so are in a position of having to make a response. *Anything* we do or don’t do is a response, whether we choose to continue on or choose to do something radically different. Any such action or inaction involves a vision, whether of a congregation which grows miraculously where there has been no growth before, or of a new, bigger congregation made up of previous smaller ones.

Two questions press in on us, one which is obvious and one which is much less so. The obvious one is, “What shall

we do?” This is not simply a question about “doing”, but about doing the “right thing”: What is the *right* thing for congregations like ours to do? This is the question of the rich man standing before Jesus: what is the right thing to do, the thing which will be rewarded? The question about the right thing is not a bad one, but it begins to turn bad when we attach to it a concern for being rewarded. Because with the entry of talk of reward and punishment we enter into the realm of anxiety and fear. While to the right thing is to win and find peace, to do the wrong thing is to lose – to lose ourselves and the things we value. Yet Christian faith is not about being at peace in the knowledge that we have done the right thing. Of course, as human beings we *must* decide, we must do *something*, but this is not the most important thing.

And this brings us to the second, less obvious question about the decisions which face us as congregations: in what spirit do we make such decisions – what would be a “Christian” decision, as distinct from the “right” one? The right spirit is struck in our thinking when we understand not what must be decided, but who we are who must decide. Or, to get back to the notion of “inheriting” eternal life, what is most important is *whose* we are as we make such decisions.

While the question of the “right” decision looms large all around us, the question of the spirit in which we decide does not seem to feature enough in our thinking about our present and our future as congregations. In the most recent edition of Crosslight the headline over the report of our new moderator’s induction sermon was “Moderator urges church to embrace change”. In fact, at least according to the account in the article itself, this wasn’t what she said,

and yet it *is* a very common thought in our church and so a predicable theme for a Crosslight headline. I wish that our church leaders would stop saying stuff like this. What we should be embracing is not “change” but God. Of course, when pressed, anyone who advocates change will say that they mean embrace God, which means embrace change. But it’s not accidental that change usually displaces God as the first thing mentioned or to be embraced in this type of talk, because we all are, for the most part, like that sad man who approached God and asked what he must “do” in order to inherit eternal life, unaware that there is nothing he can do but rest in God’s adoption of him as a son. His question was basically, what must I *change* about what I am in order to get what I’m not yet sure that I have? And so he missed the point.

While life might require that changes are made, there is nothing which we can do to change what we most basically are. The only question which matters, then, is *what are we?* By what spirit do we live? Where is the true source of our life? Is there anything fixed in our lives which cannot be assailed, whatever might besiege us?

The answer of the gospel is Yes. We are children of God, and so all that really matters is ours as *inheritance*, and not ours to earn or achieve, not ours by virtue of being “right”. Indeed we must yet make decisions about our future, but we must begin with the decision to allow that God has decided for *us* – not decided on our behalf, but *opted* for us, *chosen* us. God has given us an adoption as his children. There is nothing to be done to inherit the fullness of life, it is offered us already through Jesus the Son. Christian discipleship, in all the things we do and say, is simply a matter of becoming

more like Jesus – more like one who knows that his or her life is held in the hands of one who is utterly to be trusted.

Let us, then, simply be prepared to allow that, whatever the future holds for us and for our congregations we need not fear it and so need not seek to control it, for the future belongs to the God in whose Son our lives are hidden and held safe. If we seek *that* future, all else we need will be added to us.

By the grace of God may we settle for his vision of us, and then look to see what he will make of us. Amen.