

Sunday 10 August 2025
The Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Genesis 15.1-6
NT: Hebrews 11.1-3,8-16
Gp: Luke 12.32-40

How would you summarise Jesus' teachings? Perhaps you might point to one of his great sayings about love: love one another as I have loved you. Or we might think of the golden rule: do to others as you would wish them to do to you. There is the teaching on forgiveness, being a neighbour, making peace and withholding judgement.

All of these are core to Jesus' teaching. If we lived by them, the world would be very different. However, they're also quite general. It's easy to say them. But how do they become more than ideals? More than platitudes? All you need is love, the Beatles sang. But what is love? How do we love, and what form does it take? Is it different for friends, family, lovers? How does love show itself in times of conflict, in politics, in business? Can we be ordered to love on demand?

It seems to me that Jesus does not just want to leave us with a list of commands or ideals. He wants to change us from the inside out. Platitudes won't do that. We have to be challenged. Remade. We have to become part of the story that God is telling.

The teachings gathered in our gospel reading today give us an example of how Jesus does this. There are three sections to this passage: one on where your true treasure lies; one on waiting for the master to return home; and a final one on the owner of a house not knowing when the thief will come. At first glance, there doesn't seem to be a consistent theme and it may be that the gospel writer is responsible for gathering these fragments together.

If we look more closely, however, I suggest that there *is* a crucial thread running through what Jesus is saying. And it is about reversing expectations. Turning tables. Turning things upside down. And inviting us to be part of that process of radical change.

These are not teachings which dress up a simplistic moral message. They are parables which invite us to get involved, to see ourselves in the stories. As we hear them, we can ask: How do we react? With whom do we identify?

Let's take the teachings one at a time.

The first section has a relatively clear warning about attachment to possessions and accumulating wealth. It then goes on to suggest that true wealth lies in heaven. Jesus concludes: where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Notice something here: Jesus is not saying 'follow your heart'. We often do say that. Depending on the context it can be good advice. But can also be a cliché. And it does not face the fact that our heart can be damaged, confused, turned in on itself or corrupted. The desires of our heart could well be destructive to ourselves and others around us. Jesus puts

the emphasis on finding our true wealth: that which we really fulfil us. If we can find that, then our heart can learn its true desire.

This teaching does not leave us with a simplistic message, but with a question: what do we desire and what should we desire? What is the state of our heart, and where does it need healing and remaking? Jesus knows that we are creatures of desire, of need and love and self-love. We are not to deny all of that or pretend it does not exist. But we are to seek first, yearn first, for the kingdom of God and then all these things will be given us as well. Jesus is not afraid to talk about rewards and wealth – life is, after all, supposed to be good! But they only have any meaning if our hearts are remade, redirected towards what truly satisfies.

Already, Jesus is inviting us to be changed. To come alive in a different way. To be open to a radically new perspective. And this continues in the next teaching.

Here, we're asked to imagine ourselves as servants waiting for their master to return. There are several teachings like this. The emphasis is on keeping awake, staying alert for the decisive moment that will change everything.

And look what happens when the master does return. He gets the servants to sit and eat. The master becomes the servant, waiting on them at the table. Roles and expectations are reversed.

There is something unsettling about this. The servants cannot be sure when the master will return. All our arrogant certainty has to be set aside, along with our carelessness and neglect. In doing this, we are already allowing things to change. Certainty gets replaced by openness, by trustfulness. When the master comes home, it turns out that he is the servant and this has been our home all along. If, in some way, the master stands for God, then what a different experience of God this is from the distant king or angry judge.

The heart is remade; the master becomes the servant; certainty becomes open trust.

The final section of teaching brings together these ideas of treasure and of the master of the house – and it offers another stunning reversal. Here, we imagine ourselves, no longer the servant, but the owner of the house.

The owner of the house should not puff themselves up with assurance and property rights. For a thief is coming. The owner wants to hold on to their treasure, but they do not know when the thief will arrive.

Again, we are unsettled. Again, the uncertainty. Will we lose our wealth? But then, was it really wealth any way, or just the illusion of wealth?

In the previous teaching, we could see the master as a symbol of God. We were startled that the master served us at the table. What kind of God is that?

Here, Jesus ramps things up – for if God appears in this story at all, it is as the thief. Let that sink in: God is the thief, stealing away our illusions, our false wealth, our certainty.

Is this far-fetched? Not when we remember that Jesus also taught that the Son of Man, the representative of God's reign, would come like a thief in the night. Not when we remember that Jesus was quite happy to use the most unexpected characters to reveal something of God's presence: Samaritan apostates, dishonest stewards, sex workers and tax collectors.

I hope this gives a flavour of what Jesus is doing in his teaching. And I say 'doing' quite deliberately, because his teaching is meant to do something to us. It invites us in. It engages our imagination and desire. It remakes our hearts.

It cannot just be reduced to a moral message or list of beliefs. It is a journey through the fire, towards the transformation of all that we are.

In this way, Jesus' teaching is of a piece with his incarnation, death and resurrection. For what Christians have always tried to hold on to is the radical reversal that God becomes one of us; that God's power and glory is shown in weakness, abandonment and death; that God's victory is known only through the victim, and God's reign only known through self-emptying love.

Christianity is not a set of rules to live by. It is faith. And faith is not believing a list of improbable things but is openness to the surprise of God. Openness to the grace, mystery and wonder of God. As the letter to the Hebrews says, it is journeying towards an unknown horizon in trust. Faith is not certainty.

If you come here wondering what it is you believe and whether it all makes sense then you are in good company. We are not here to congratulate one another on our righteousness, purity or certainty. We are here to accompany one another in a journey of faithful uncertainty. And the ultimate companion on that journey is the God who comes to us as one unexpected, invites us to sit, and breaks bread with us.

Fr Steven Shakespeare