



Sermon preached by Revd Dr David Cornick on 10th August 2025

Readings: Isaiah 1:1,10-20; Hebrews 11:1-5, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

Pentecost 9

‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.’ (Luke 12:32)

The whole meaning of the Christian life, indeed, all of the gospel, is squeezed into those words of Jesus. I do sometimes wonder about the ways in which the lectionary is devised, because we can’t really understand today’s gospel without remembering last week’s – which is a tall order for most of us.

‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom’ makes little sense unless we realise that it’s one half of a contrast of ways of living at least partly obscured by the demands of the lectionary. Last week we were introduced to a champion of consumption, Mr Worldly Wealthy who built a magnificent suite of barns and storage facilities the better to hold all his possessions, but regrettably dropped dead before he could crack open the Chateaux Lafite and tuck into the fois gras.

So, on the one hand, Mr Worldly Wealthy, and on the other hand, the little flock. In between, Luke records part of what we know better as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew – don’t worry, don’t be anxious, for it is the good pleasure of the God who feeds the ravens and clothes the lilies in Solomonic splendour ‘to give you the kingdom’. Your security lies there, not in the accumulative desperation of Mr Wordly Wealthy, says Jesus, so sell your possessions and give alms.

Perhaps there we should press the pause button just there, because I don’t see many of us preparing to forsake Cambridge’s leafy suburbs and satellite villages to take vows of poverty in either the Franciscans or the Poor Clares. If you are, I apologise and salute you! It’s easy to get carried away on a tide of spiritual romanticism when we encounter this kind of teaching, which is another good reason to press the pause button.

Having pressed it, let’s think more broadly about the way Luke tells the story of Jesus and the early church. He makes clear that not all disciples were the same. Some, undoubtedly, were called to be fishers of men, leaving everything to follow Jesus, but by no means all. Luke himself was a physician, and his writings in both his gospel and Acts are unashamedly realistic in their recognition of wealthy followers of Jesus – from Joanna the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza and Susanna who ‘provided out of their resources’ for the mission (8:3), to Joseph of Arimathea who gave Jesus a tomb, to Lydia the seller of purple dye, who at the least provided a house for the church meeting in Phillipi, and probably leadership as well. If all possessions had been sold, the church would not have happened.

And, of course, Jesus adds a qualifier, ‘...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.’ (8:34) And that will determine what kind of person you are, what kind of disciple you will become. Wealth isn’t wrong. It’s the value we place on it that might well be.

It is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom, little flock. Our culture finds it hard to talk of God, although perhaps not as hard as it found it fifteen to twenty years ago. And part of that is because God cannot be conceptualised, for any conceptualisation is inevitably less than God. One definition of God is a greater than which nothing can be conceived. One common misunderstanding of Christian belief by those outside the faith is that just like atheists, Christians accept everything in the universe and then add ‘+1’, God. As we know that is literally ‘non-sense’ because God the creator is by definition not another object in creation, but rather the creator and sustainer of all that is, all that shall be, and all that could possibly be. Let me offer you a rather different view of God. Melvyn Bragg once asked Rowan Williams what he understood God to be, and he replied:

‘God is first and foremost that depth around all things and beyond all things into which, when I pray, I try to sink. But God is also the activity that comes to me out of that depth, tells me I’m loved, that opens up the future to me, that offers transformations I can’t imagine. Very much a mystery but also very much a presence. Very much a person.’

That resonates profoundly with Jesus’s insistence that God cares for each individual. In Jesus’ teaching the poetry is forceful and memorable. Not a sparrow is forgotten. Even the hairs on your head are all counted (Luke 12:7). God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being. As Ruth Duck puts it in a hymn we will sing later

Womb of life and source of being,
Home of every restless heart,
In your arms the world awakened;
You have loved us from the start. (CH4 118 Ruth Duck)

God gives you the kingdom, little flock. The alternative to Mr Worldly Wealth’s desperate acquisitiveness, is immersion in the mystery that is God, the slow unfolding of purpose and understanding - a word caught there, a thought that prompts new horizons, a need seen that must be answered by small sacrifices of time and money, a calling, urging and prompting to become someone different, someone more Christ-shaped. Caught in the kingdom spiral of hints, nudges, prayers, Alleluias and occasionally sheer wonder. Discovering who God is, that the world is, who we are.

And part of that calling is the activism of awareness. For Jesus told a story of a household caught up in that most stressful of occasions – a wedding banquet. And for his storytelling purposes, the ‘little flock’ to whom the kingdom is given, are transposed into slaves, waiting for the return of the Master of the house. It’s a funny little story. The slaves are alert and hard at work, the house ready, oil lamps lit, doubtless food and wine were on hand. All the product of serious work. Food doesn’t cook itself. Oil needs fetching and wicks need trimming. So far so reasonable, and then expectations are upended. The master does return, but far from the slaves feeding him, he serves them, and as it were brings the wedding banquet to them. One commentator even wonders if the wedding banquet was in a separate part of the house, and that the Master decided to extend the banquet to his private staff in his suite of rooms. I think that stretches the text, although it makes sense of the sparse details we have in front of us. But it doesn’t alter the thrust of Jesus’s teaching, which is that our God invites us to sit down and eat. We remember George Herbert - ‘You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat: So I did sit and eat.’ In other words, no longer slaves, but family, for by grace Christ makes us his brothers and sisters.

Small wonder for, little flock, it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Is our treasure there, or elsewhere? Mr Wordly Wealth provides one example. His treasure lay in his ever-increasing bank account, and his endless consumption. But treasure can be hoarded in other places – in the steady acquisition of learning and the kudos that accompanies it, in the intimacy of family life and the security and power that flows from it, in public service and the acclaim that follows. None of them are wrong, just as there is nothing wrong with wealth in itself. What may be wrong is the value we attach to them. We need to be joyfully alert to the reality that the kingdom passes through all of them. That is the test of perspective.

Faith, the author of Hebrews reminds us, ‘...is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’. (11:1) That is the beginning of a roll call of the heroes and heroines of Israel’s faith, but he concentrates on Abraham who heard a voice, embraced a promise, walked out into uncertainty, was unafraid to live as a stranger in an alien land, and trusted the promise of a fecund future despite his age and Sara’s barrenness. Caught up in God, the depth in all things that Rowan Williams talked about, open to a future that was obvious to none but God, but above all trusting, knowing he and Sara were caught up in a vista, a ‘big picture’, that was greater than they could envisage. And they lived ‘as if’ it were true because in their guts they knew that it was.

The theologian and scientist Alister McGrath wrote that we sometimes think that believing in God is a bit like believing that there is an extra moon orbiting Uranus – that is to say it's a factual statement about something being there. But it isn't. Faith, he suggests is '...trusting that there is a viable 'big picture' of life, leading into a decision to step inside this worldview and live it out.' (*Why we believe* p.69)

It's a stepping out, an act of trust, a surrender to love, an opening of the eyes and a tempering of the soul to see that this extraordinary universe, and this life, this miracle of consciousness, is a gift, not the product of chance. It's about realising that the gift is given to us by the God who created it all, and holds it in being, who loves us and yearns for our love and brings us healing, wholeness and hope in the life-expanding, death-destroying person of Jesus, the resurrected one.

Let me end with a story, again from Rowan Williams, of two world views. He was once interviewed by John Snow, himself the son of an Anglican bishop, but a determined humanist. Rowan told the story of an incident when he was Bishop of Monmouth. There had been a horrible murder of a schoolgirl in one of his parishes, and the vicar priests opened the church for the evening so that the girl's fellow pupils could have a space to light a candle and be quiet. And they flocked to it. John Snow fully appreciated the importance of that. It was about solidarity, faith in the human spirit and all that, and indeed he himself went to church once a month to experience the same reality of being together in community. The trouble is, he said to Rowan, '...you want God in it.'

'Well', Rowan replied, 'It's not a question of what I want! If God is there, God is in it. That's the end of it.'

The overwhelming experience of Christians is precisely that God is there, in it. In the depths, in the sorrow and pain, in the grieving, in the search for understanding, in the possibility that humanity being so very much more than we think it is. Do not be afraid, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Amen.