

If you have seen the recent blockbuster film, the Hobbit or read Tolkein's original version of the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings you will know the somewhat unpleasant character of Gollum, so called because of his rather disgusting, choking cough. Gollum, like the good Bilbo and Frodo Baggins, we eventually discover, was a hobbit by birth. But, unlike them, he had become deformed and twisted both in body and mind by his overwhelming desire to possess the 'One Ring', with its special powers. His frequent, haunting refrain when referring to the ring was 'My Precious'. He had become trapped and enslaved by his desire – and what became his need – to possess the ring. And it led to him becoming something that he was not.

'Where your treasure is there your heart is also', says Jesus.

We all have the potential to be overtaken and controlled by our treasures – those things that we prize most highly. It seems to be a common human temptation; we have quite a weakness for having things – money, possessions, status. And the society we live in bombards us with messages that want us to believe that what we own will make us happy, will give us worth. And the danger is real whether we are rich or poor. It may be particularly challenging for those who have most to hold on to, but it is a danger for all of us.

Last week Sarah told us about her first trip to Africa, seeing the majestic Victoria Falls. . My first trip to Africa was to a rural part of Kenya where I was to work for a couple of years. I only had a 20kg baggage allowance to take with me the things I might need for 2 years. Not a lot of scope for treasures you might think. But I had a Sony Walkman (do you remember those small audio cassette players that became all the rage in the 1980s and made music portable for the first time – long since overtaken by mp3 players, iPods and the like) well I had a Sony Walkman and a pair of small speakers and it was one of my few luxuries. I'm ashamed to say that it became rather important to me, so much so that I guarded it jealously and declined to lend it to African friends in the village. One evening as I was sitting at my desk marking student work by candlelight there was a knock at the door and I was called up to the school to deal with a student who was unwell. By the time I got back the candle had burnt down – and so had my Walkman – almost completely melted! To my shame, I have to admit that I was devastated. It seems ridiculous now, but that Walkman had become just too valuable and too important to me – a treasure that I prized too highly and whose loss made me very upset.

You see, it's not so much about what we have as it is about our attitude to our possessions. When they become too precious, they get in the way of what's really important. In our Gospel reading Jesus says 'sell your possessions and give alms. Make for yourselves purses that won't wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven'. The Jews would have been familiar with that phrase, 'treasure in heaven' – to them it meant deeds of mercy and kindness to those in distress. When Jesus equates selling possessions and giving to the needy with treasure in heaven I don't believe we should take what he's saying to mean that owning things or having possessions is inherently wrong. And taking the whole sweep of Jesus' teaching and the teaching of the New Testament as a whole, we are not commanded to own nothing. We do need to put a roof over our heads, to have clothes to wear, food for the table, to provide for ourselves and our families. But we are expected to be generous with what we have, not holding things too tightly to ourselves and for ourselves

Where your treasure is, says Jesus, there your heart will be also. Our treasures are to be in God and in the things of God, not in the worldly riches that we enjoy. They are things that can be stolen or

destroyed. As Matthew's Gospel puts it 'do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal'. Ultimately such worldly riches will have no value for us. In the story that Jesus tells in our Gospel reading, the rich man built bigger and bigger barns to store his grain, storing up treasure for himself, feeling pleased with himself because of all he owned – yet he was soon to discover, as we all will, we can't take it with us.

It reminds me of a story of a man who was a real miser – he had worked hard all his life and had saved all his money. In fact, he loved money more than just about anything. And just before he died, he said to his wife, "Now listen. When I die, I want you to take all my money and put it in the coffin with me." And he made her to promise with all her heart that she would do it. Well, one day he died. He was stretched out in the coffin and just before the undertakers got ready to seal the lid, his wife said, "Wait just a minute!"

She had a box with her, and she came over and put it in the coffin. Then the undertakers locked it down, and they rolled it away. And her friend said, "Surely you weren't foolish enough to put all that money in there with that old miser."

"Look", she said, "I can't lie. I promised him that I was going to put that money in that coffin with him."

"You mean to tell me you put all that money in the coffin?"

"I surely did," said the wife. "I wrote him a cheque."

²⁰But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

Last week we heard how everything belongs to God, everything we have has been given to us by God. And we focused on our breathing, breathing in and receiving of God's generosity and breathing out to share it with others. If it were only one way we would either explode like an over inflated balloon, or fizzle away, spent and empty.

And today I'd like us to make two fists and hold them up in front of us. That's what we're like if we try to hold on what we have. It's mine. I'm going to keep it that way. Remember the proverbial monkey trap - a cage containing a banana with a hole large enough for a monkey's hand to fit in, but not large enough for a monkey's fist (clutching a banana) to come out. It was used to trap the monkey because it didn't have the intelligence to let go of the banana and be free. Now open your hands in front of you. This is the way we are to be – with open hands. Hands that can both receive and hands that are stretched out in offering both to God and to others. Treasure in heaven is about treasure in the kingdom of God and it's about love, about acts of kindness, about generosity. It's about living with open hands and open hearts.

And so it matters how we use what has been given to us. It matters that we are generous in what we give away. Giving is a spiritual exercise – it is inextricably linked with what we believe about God and the priority of God in our lives - what's really important to us. And that's why Paul can talk about giving cheerfully – being joyful in the act of giving.

So when we think about our giving to God's work in and through the Church, and how we might respond to the invitation to review our giving that is in this leaflet, perhaps in the privacy of our own homes we might pray, stretching out our hands and saying those wonderful words we say week after week 'All things come from you and of your own do I give you'.

Open hands and open hearts. Amen.