

Sunday 31 July 2016

Col 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

Anyone who has had any association with children over the last 40 years or so will have come into contact with The Mr Men. Their bold shapes and bright colours adorn books, television programmes and a vast amount of merchandise. They appeal to adults and children alike. I think this is because they say something about us. They illustrate characteristics with which we can identify. A picture of Mr Happy can make us smile, Mr Bump might make us feel comforted.

Mr Greedy, like the rich fool in our gospel, thinks only of himself. He eats vast amounts of food but is still able to find room for more when he comes across a giant's cave and a table laden with giant size food. Mr Greedy lives in the moment, taking what he can where he can to fill his rather large stomach. He learns his lesson when the giant forces him to eat all the food. Rather than feeling satisfied, Mr Greedy is left feeling ill. From then on he adopts a more sensible approach to eating.

The greed of the rich fool is similar. What he hungers for is security. This is understandable in a farming society where people depend on the land for subsistence. We don't know how he has come to have such a bumper crop. It may be through hard work, good management, good fortune or a combination of all three. In his mind he has earned the right to sit back and enjoy himself. But he too is only thinking of the short term. As we learn, the huge barns and stocks of food cannot provide security in eternity.

The Message bible paraphrases the warning at the end of our reading. God tells the man that his life will be taken and his stores are of no use, The Message says;

"That's what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God"

We live in a society where we don't depend directly on the land for our sustenance. We don't have to store up food for our security, so what do we put into our barns? Ours is a consumer society. We are accustomed to having fruit and vegetables flown across the world so that we can eat them out of season. We buy things online where we might have more choice and so that we don't have to trouble ourselves with a trip to the shops.

We demand fast delivery. Last week Amazon announced they would be testing the use of drones so that packages could be delivered within 30 minutes of order.

We have drive through food outlets and banks and, I have recently learnt that in Las Vegas you can have a drive through wedding!

It seems to me that rather than filling our barns with things, we fill it with our demands and expectations which we class as consumer rights.

We measure them with endless customer satisfaction surveys but it seems we are never satisfied. We are consumers. We consume. Synonyms include words like devour, ingest, gobble up.

Like Mr Greedy, we don't know when to stop. Of course there is a place for protecting those who are vulnerable and liable to be exploited, but the things I am talking about are more about improving our own position than looking out for others.

Another use of the term consume is to destroy by fire. A BBC article suggests that consumer culture, rather than improving society is destroying it.

Consumer culture means that we put our own interests and expectations first. This hardens our hearts to the needs of others and clouds the bigger picture.

In a survey of environmental and social attitudes. Two groups of people were given a questionnaire to complete. For half, the front cover said "Consumer Reaction Study", for the rest "Citizen Reaction Study." No specific attention was drawn to the difference in wording and there was no other significant difference between the two groups. Those who answered the Consumer Reaction Study were far less motivated to care about society or the environment than the others.

The suggestion is that the word consumer is so ingrained in our psyche that it can affect our behaviour patterns. The implication is that everything comes down to our individual comfort and convenience in the short term. This is no way for society to flourish as Jesus warns us in the parable.

Jesus concludes by urging us to avoid such behaviour. He says we must be "Rich towards God."

How can we do this?

One way is to look at how Jesus himself responds to temptation. At the beginning of his ministry he spent forty days fasting in the wilderness. During this time, he was tempted with food when Satan challenged him to turn a stone into a loaf of bread. Jesus replied,

"Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Satan challenged again offering riches and glory if Jesus would bow down and worship him. But again Jesus refused, saying;

"Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

In other words, Jesus is saying, "Put God first", "Put God in your barn." "Make God central".

Paul has a similar theme in our epistle reading where he says set your mind on things that are above not on things that are on earth. Paul urges us not merely to reject earthly desires but to put them to death. Paul uses the metaphor of taking off and putting on clothes. The old clothes are to be discarded and the new true self is revealed.

We change our clothes because they are not appropriate for the occasion. What is suitable for going to bed, is not right to go to a party. What you wear to school or work won't help if you want to go swimming.

Similarly, the old clothes of earthly desires are not appropriate for a life lived as a follower of Christ.

The new self is not a set of behaviour patterns, but a state of the heart. It is a way of worship and witness for an entire people of God. It is a way of living for an entire community.

We must however each play our part. We must work out what it means to be a follower of Christ. The fruit of our faith will be how we relate to those around us. How we build community. How we love God and how we love one another.

I have read that the opposite of love is not hate as you might suppose, but greed. Greed draws everything in towards itself. It consumes in all senses of the word. Love on the other hand reaches outwards overflowing from one person to the next.

One of my sons takes great pleasure in the phrase that you need to be a radiator not a drain. It has become a bit of a family joke, but it is a useful illustration of my point.

We need to radiate heat and warmth to others not drain heat and warmth from them.

By putting God in our barns we fill them with love. Love for God and love for each other. Such behaviour cannot be contained or restricted. By its very nature it flows outwards into the communities in which we live.

At the end of the story Mr Greedy appears with a new slimmer shape. If Mr Men wore clothes, he would need new ones. It's never easy to change bad habits.

I have found that the one way to change eating habits is to add in healthy foods rather than start by cutting out the unhealthy ones. By including more healthy food we can lose the desire for less healthy food. It's not fool proof but it is a starting point and one we can adapt to our spiritual lives.

We cannot avoid our culture completely, but perhaps we can give some thought to the way we consume. It may involve small positive changes in our approach.

By centring our lives on Jesus and making deposits of love into our barn we gradually squeeze out selfish and self serving behaviour. In so doing we become rich towards God.

Kathy Kilgour July 16