

Sermon 31.7.22 (the rich fool)

Genesis 18.20–32; Psalm 49; Colossians 3.1–11; Luke 12.13–21

Many of you will know that my job is as a historian, and that I work on the Middle Ages, the period of European history that finished about five hundred years ago. Recently I have been studying a group of theologians known as the German mystics, of whom the most famous is Meister Eckhart, a Dominican friar who lived in various cities in Germany and France in the fourteen century.

Today Eckhart is most famous for his description of what happens when the soul is united with God, and how he expresses this in a language that mixes theology and poetry. When he talks about this moment, he emphasises above all that it takes place at a point that exists outside of time and space, that has no form or shape or colour, no before and after, that has no ethics, even, no good or bad. In fact, one of the most common metaphors he uses for this place is the desert.

When I began to study Eckhart, I noticed how similar this seemed to meditation in the Buddhist tradition, or the practice of mindfulness, of sitting silently, allowing our thoughts to come and then gently pushing them away, until it feels almost as if we stop existing.

I assumed, like many modern readers of the mystics, that mysticism is what takes place when, after long hours, or rather years, of such silent prayer, our souls are suddenly bonded to God; the experience of special, fleeting, extraordinary moments, when we feel a certain sensation or emotion or feeling that passes through our body.

It took me a long time to realise that I had got it wrong. What I have just described to you would be almost entirely foreign to Eckhart.

For Eckhart, mysticism is not a special kind of feeling or sensation, an emotion, a vision, or even a moment. Prayer is essential – but mysticism is not just one special variety of it, meditation takes its place alongside ritual, study, discipline.

In fact, mysticism is more like an ethic, a whole way of being that lasts not for a moment but for a lifetime. It is not a feeling or sensation but a lifestyle; not a fleeting encounter but a constant activity.

Eckhart calls this 'living without a why' – and what he means by this is that the mystic cannot give an account of her actions in terms that makes sense to the world, she cannot answer the question 'why?'. So, for example, if somebody asks why you helped your neighbour, you can give no rational, self-interested answer, like 'so he will do that

same for me in the future', or 'I'm paying her back for what she did in the past', or 'then I'll feel good about myself for helping someone'. These are all 'whys'.

The answer you would have to give is almost meaningless, something like, that I do kind things in order to do kind things, I want to be kind in order to be kind. These actions are mystical because God is that kindness, that goodness, that exists in kind actions itself.

Perhaps, by now, you are wondering why I have begun my sermon, given the readings that we just heard, readings that are preoccupied by money, greed, crops – things of the world, things that might seem to have nothing whatsoever to do with spirituality. But perhaps also, by now, it is becoming clear that I think the things of the world have everything to do with spirituality.

In the Gospel reading, we heard of one man who wants to get his inheritance and of another who has so many crops he decides to build a bigger barn for them. The first seeks financial independence from his brother; the second seeks security in the future.

These are people who are behaving, at least according to the standards of their world and ours, sensibly, who are seeking to live according to their own desires, to maximise profits, to safeguard their future, to ensure a comfortable retirement. They certainly can give a good answer to the question 'why?': 'Why do you seek your inheritance?' 'Why do you seek to build a larger barn?'. Their financial advisor, the money pages of a newspaper, perhaps even their families, would commend their wisdom, caution and prudence.

Jesus, of course, does the opposite. Where the rich man acts prudently, Jesus commands urgency; where he thinks of the future, Jesus tells him to focus on the present; when he seeks independence, Jesus refuses to help him.

The Gospel message is as countercultural today as it was 2000 years ago. In fact, financialised capitalism has made common what was once exceptional: then few could store crops in a barn; now many of us can store savings in a bank, or shares, pension plans, and so forth. Once, few had security in the future; today many, at least in developed nations, do.

As I read and reflected on this passage, it seemed to me that Eckhart is, perhaps surprisingly, quite practical here. In the other reading we just heard, the writer of Colossians urges his readers to 'Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.' Eckhart would agree but he also knew that we have to live earthly lives, that we are called to live in a world of money, debt, saving and so on.

Eckhart teaches not that we are to live carelessly towards the things of the world but that we are always to remember what gives them their importance. The twelfth chapter of Luke's Gospel, from which the Gospel reading is taken, is full of important and serious messages, teachings about the body, about hypocrisy, about preaching, about arrest – and so when the rich man interrupts all this to ask about his own inheritance it seems petty, inconsequential.

Jesus' problem with the rich men is not that saving money or seeking financial independence takes money too seriously but rather that it does not take money seriously enough. Instead of using an inheritance or a bumper crop to achieve something of value, of using it for the sake of virtue and goodness, these men seek only independence and merriment.

To live 'without a why' is not the same as not taking life seriously: we should take life very seriously indeed, but never on its own terms, and always because life is the place where virtue, where God himself, may be made real.

We should take money seriously not because money is serious but because with money we can do serious things – serious things like kindness, generousness, comfort, joyfulness. These are the only right answers to the question of 'why?'. Why save? Not because saving brings security but because it enables us to be virtuous with our money; why spend? For the same reason.

I want to end this sermon with this observation – that there is a deep kindness to asking, what is money, what are all our resources, for? It's a kindness that works well both politically and individually. Our politics has become deeply concerned with growth, disconnecting wealth from kindness or gentleness. As individuals too, it is easy to ask 'how do I look after my money?' and not 'how do I use my money to look after the things that really matter?'.
And so I finish this sermon with a prayer by Eckhart, a prayer that reminds us that God is not in special states of wealth and poverty, in one type of prayer but not another, but that he gives himself everywhere that that there is virtue and goodness.

Eckhart said:

Whoever wants to receive God properly must receive him equally in all things, in oppression as in prosperity, in tears as in joy. Always and everywhere He is the same.

Amen.