

Sermon delivered by The Bishop of Croydon, The Rt. Revd Jonathan Clark, at the Oxted Team Ministry Inauguration at St John's Hurst Green on 5th November 2014.

I don't think I would have dared to choose this gospel reading (**Luke 14.27-33**) – but here it is, the reading set for today in the lectionary. And having been given it, I certainly wouldn't dare to turn it down. At the very heart of Christian discipleship is this double movement – that it is only in giving up all we have, all our security and comfort, all our own plans to assure our future and ensure our safety, all our own aspirations to control our lives – it is only in giving up all of those that we find the true security which comes from Christ. Only then are we saved.

Jesus' words went home in his own age: how much more so in ours. Many of Jesus' original hearers had nothing much to give up – their only clothes would be the ones on their backs, their only food what they could buy or forage today. As we praise God – and we should – that we are not in such a situation, we must take heed too that the challenge presented to us by the gospel is all the greater. And it is re-doubled by the materialist culture in which we live. Materialism is about more than being well off – it is a whole system of values and practices which elevates material well being and possessions above anything else. Jesus told the parable of the rich man who congratulated himself on having enough – I will eat, drink and make merry, he says. That man is called a fool by God; today he would be praised, rewarded with tax breaks and courted by investment firms. That rich man had forgotten that his life was not under his own control. Nowadays we try harder and harder to make sure that it is, and our abilities to do so have increased tremendously.

How can we both enjoy the good gifts we are given, and still remain wise in God's eyes? The answer has to be in holding what we have lightly, holding it as gift, not our own possession. Whatever we may have acquired in our lives, through inheritance or through our own work, in the end it is not ours: it is God's gift to us. That is the meaning of Jesus' words which seem so hard – not that we should literally react with loathing to our nearest and dearest – but something almost equally hard: that the calling of God on our lives should not take second place even to the call of family, even to our own lives. To count the cost is to recognise how far-reaching is God's call on our lives. It does involve holding all our possessions as gifts. And gifts from God are not free from strings. They come with the condition that we should be as generous with what we have been given as God has been to us. God gives good gifts in order to create a cycle of love and generosity.

It is in that spirit of mutual giving that God is calling us to approach the inauguration of this new team ministry. This is not a mere re-arrangement of the desks in an office shake up. My prayer and hope for you is that this new team will provide resources for the good news of Jesus Christ to be lived out in your communities which will be greater than the sum of the parts. The parish system of the Church of England is one of its great glories; it can also be its straightjacket. The local worshipping community which represents its locality in its prayerfulness and which provides a holy space for the people of each neighbourhood is a great treasure. Alongside that, there are opportunities to serve wider neighbourhoods and communities which can be lost when a parish becomes parochial. It is not insignificant that that word has become a synonym for a reluctance to look to the wider horizon, to be involved with the concerns of others. The parish as its best is a springboard for a wider love for the whole community of humankind. At its worst it is a little island, defending itself fearfully against a world of danger and difference.

For the last ten days Bishop Ishmael of our link diocese of Central Zimbabwe has been visiting the Croydon area, visiting parishes and institutions across the area. Our shared ministry with the people of Central Zimbabwe is a powerful reminder to me of the common identity we share with people across the world whose lives are very different from ours. They are our brothers and sisters as we are theirs; all of us are enriched in our own identity by being linked together. This is a time in our country when people are increasingly fearful of losing their identity. Those who are different, particularly those who come from other countries, are especially the target of fear and anger. The Christian witness is that we have nothing to fear, and everything to receive, from those who have something else to offer, another gift to give. That applies at every level: our local neighbours, our neighbouring communities, and all the way up to nations and peoples.

A team ministry is a spiritual task –part of the joyful task of witnessing to the love of Christ that respects no barriers, that unites all people in the one body which is his body. It invites you into a voyage of further exploration of what it means to live as one body in Christ serving Crowhurst , Hurst Green, Oxted and Tandridge (listed in alphabetical order, I hope you are noting). This is a voyage shared with other Christian bodies, and with the wider community of which you are part. The Christian calling is to the flourishing of all people, and to the love and care of all. May God bless you as you joyfully set aside any fears and hesitations, and seek what Christ is doing in this new thing. Each individual, each church community brings to this venture its own gifts and strengths: do not hold them to yourselves, but treat them as gifts to be shared, even given away. And you will receive back in manifold measure more than you have given.