

FEBRUARY 28, 2016

# SYDNEY

## Introduction

Good morning to you all and welcome to our service on this beautiful Sunday morning on what is the second last day of summer.

As autumn draws near, we come to that time of the year when it's good to get out into the garden and look at how everything has survived the summer. It's a time for us to look at how our planting went, how successful it was, and what we can do better for next year. And it's also the time to start planning our winter crops, starting with garden bed rotation and the manuring, composting and aerating of the soil again in preparation for winter planting. And then selecting and planting what we want to grow during the cooler months.

I draw the analogy, because this is also the time when we as human beings traditionally start to prepare ourselves for the coming winter. Autumn is a time when we see the world slowly descend into the lethargy associated with cooler days, woollen jumpers and hot chocolate drinks, all the time staring out the window as the wind whips up the autumn leaves into a flurry of multi-coloured flakes, only to see them slowly drift back to earth. At least, it's like that in Melbourne. Here, that change is probably not that pronounced, but I think you get what I mean.

## ELDER THEO RICHTER

Autumn is a time for reflection. It's a time to look at where we're going and to try to decide whether that's what we want in life, or if we should start seeking new directions and planning changes for ourselves. It's a time to evaluate what is important to us; be that in our outer pursuits – family, friendships, work, education, play; or in our inner pursuits – spiritual enlightenment, personal growth, personal challenge, health and wellbeing.

The decisions we make now are the ones we will move forward with as we progress through our lives in the immediate future. Those decisions are based on what we have learned and experienced up until today in our life; on the external factors like our home environment, our social experience, our education and the norms that we accept as the basic building blocks of the community in which we live. They are also based on the internal factors that make up who we are; our morality, our conscience, our ethics and our spirituality. These are heady considerations that really do require some contemplation; perhaps not every autumn, but at least every other autumn. That way we can gauge how we are travelling against our personal targets and, if we desire, we can reset the direction that we have planned for our lives.

In that spirit of autumnal contemplation, let us then proceed into our service today. I thought we should start with a hymn that tells of the underlying belief that we as members of the

Templer community identify with and attempt to set our lives by. From Matthew 6:33, “Set your mind on God’s Kingdom and His justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well.”

### **Hymn – *Trachtet ruft***

Our first hymn for today will thus be ‘*Trachtet ruft mit ernstem Worte*’ (Seek you first of all God’s Kingdom) which is hymn number 1 in the hymnbook. We shall sing four verses – verses 1, 2, 9 and 10.

### **Text**

Our text for today is taken from Luke 16: verses 8 to 13, and tells of the parable Jesus told to his disciples of the rich man who hires an accountant to look after his affairs. The accountant was given free rein to run all of the business activities relating to the rich man’s properties, whilst the rich man himself set about to enjoy the fruits of his wealth.

It wasn’t long though before rumours started to circulate that the accountant was a devious and dishonest man who was creaming off part of the rich man’s wealth for himself. And so it was that the rich man also heard about the rumours and he summoned the accountant before him to establish if the rumours were true. On hearing the accountant’s explanation, the rich man was not impressed so he told the accountant to get the books in order and then he would be dismissed.

Being a wily man, the accountant thought hard about what he could do. He considered himself too old to do manual labour; he was too proud to beg on the streets; he was too used to the wealth he had gleaned to go back to the poorly life he had lived before he’d commenced working for the rich man. And so, he hatched a plot to ingratiate himself with the rich man’s debtors, thus winning

for himself a bevy of wealthy benefactors who would look after him when he left the rich man’s service.

He called a meeting with the debtors and as they came to him, one by one, he asked them how much money they owed the rich man, and one by one, he told them to rewrite their contracts, altering the amount of the debt to a more reasonable amount. To the man who owed 850 gallons of olive oil, he said to write a new contract for half that amount. To the man who owed 1000 bushels of wheat, he said rewrite the contract for only 800 bushels, and so on for all the debtors.

And this is where our text begins. It reads thus:

“The rich man had to admire the rascal for being so shrewd. And it is true that the citizens of this world are more clever [in dishonesty] than the godly are. But shall I tell you to act that way, to buy friendship through cheating? Will this ensure your entry into an everlasting home in heaven? No! For unless you are honest in small matters, you won’t be in large ones. And if you cheat even a little, you won’t be honest with greater responsibilities. And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven? And if you are not faithful with other people’s money, why should you be entrusted with money of your own?”

For neither you nor anyone else can serve two masters. You will hate one and show loyalty to the other, or else the other way around – you will be enthusiastic about one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

### **Discussion**

When we look at the timeframe of our text, we know that Jesus has declared himself as

special, as the Messiah, and in this context he was travelling the countryside of Galilee, slowly wending his way to Jerusalem, preaching and teaching as he went. He had with him his disciples who were still raw in their understanding, still raw in their companionship and, above all, still questioning his purpose and their role in its concepts, its delivery and its eventual continuity. This was a time of revelation, of describing the message that God had for the people; a time to speak out against the unfair and unjust; the hard hearts and unbending minds of those who ruled society; a time to speak instead about the simple message that anyone could commune with God without need for sacrifice or external intervention.

It was a time of hope and rejoicing, as the crowds who came from far and wide to listen to this fellow of whom they had heard so much; of this amazing new prophet who spoke with such conviction and candour about the very issues that troubled their hearts and troubled their minds and whose words were like balm, flattening the troubled waters and soothing their very existence.

And it was a time of confrontation with the established order, the Pharisees and other religious leaders who had corrupted God's relationship with mankind and who saw the message Jesus spoke as a direct threat to their very existence.

Jesus was by this time sorely challenging the establishment. Most of the texts preceding and following ours today are overlaid by confrontations between Jesus and the religious leaders and these were primarily over differences in theoretical and actual practice. Jesus chose both word and action to debunk the tenets and maxims that were held dear by the establishment – the healing of a severely handicapped woman in the synagogue on the Sabbath, breaking the rule that no man should work on the Sabbath; inviting

tax collectors to eat with him, breaking the law that you shouldn't be in the company of unclean people; the parable of the Pharisee who lorded over all in the Temple, swelling his breast with arrogance and self-importance, whilst the lowly tax collector barely raised his eyes and asked for forgiveness (for the proud shall be humbled and the humble shall be honoured). The examples abound of Jesus demonstrating the exact opposite of what was considered the social and established norms.

On being told that 'You cannot serve both God and money', the Pharisees who were present at the time scoffed at his remark because it was a contradiction of their belief. Money gave them power and they dearly loved their money and, equally, they loved their power! Jesus admonished them saying, 'You wear a noble and pious expression in public, but God knows your evil hearts. Your pretence brings you honour from the people, but it is an abomination in the eyes of God!'

And that is a great segue into a very recent and ongoing example of exactly what Jesus was saying. I'm sure you have all heard of the recent furore caused by a comment made by Pope Francis on the last day of his pilgrimage to Mexico. In his last speech, and very near the US/Mexican border, he was asked to comment on the proposal being made by some presidential candidates to build 'a border wall with Mexico'.

In response, Pope Francis said, 'A person who thinks only about building walls... and not of building bridges, is not Christian.'

That of course set off the aggressive and gregarious Donald Trump, who took it as a slight against him, even though he had not been specifically mentioned. It calls to mind that wonderful German saying '*Getroffene Hunde*

*bellen*' (badly translated that means 'the dog barks when he's hit'). Calling himself a "proud Christian", Mr Trump blamed Mexico for the Pope's remarks, calling them "disgraceful".

I don't want to comment further on the exchange except to say that, looking at the range of presidential hopefuls vying for the top position, I wish Pope Francis was in contention because he seems to be the only one with his head and heart in the right place.

What the exchange did, though, was crystallise my thoughts on that statement 'a proud Christian'. What does that really mean and who can call themselves one? By Jesus' definition, it is someone who has love behind every thought they have and every action they take as they go about their daily lives. It is about being genuine and being genuinely humble in your interactions; it's about accepting others despite their foibles because you never know what is really happening in their lives. But, always, it is about having love at the forefront of everything you do.

And that's why I thought of the Pope's comment. You see, I believe there are things you have a right to claim, and there are things that can only be bestowed upon you by others. So I look at Donald Trump's response and I truly question what he believes. I think he can easily say 'I'm a Christian' because that's simply him telling us to which 'tribe' he belongs. But when Trump says 'I'm a proud Christian', then he's subscribing to all the traits that make a 'good Christian' according to the definitions that were laid down by God and were reiterated by Jesus. And the things that Donald Trump says certainly don't fit that description.

I believe the honour of being a good Christian is not a title you can claim for yourself – it's one that you must earn, and it can only be bestowed

upon you by the people who know you. Being a Christian is not about quoting Bible texts verbatim; it is not about condemning others who are less fortunate; it is not about turning up to church every Sunday; it's not about ridiculing people publicly and it's most certainly not about polarising people against each other.

So when I think of Donald Trump, I unfortunately only have one image in my mind – not the one of the lowly tax collector in the Temple barely raising his eyes and asking for forgiveness but, rather, the one of the Pharisee who lorded over all in the Temple, swelling his breast with arrogance and self-importance. And I only hear the response that Jesus said, 'You wear a noble and pious expression in public, but God knows your evil hearts.'

The other part of our text, the part that carries all the weight, is 'For neither you nor anyone else can serve two masters. You will hate one and show loyalty to the other, or else the other way around – you will be enthusiastic about one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.'

Whenever I read this text, I'm drawn to the words written by Paul in the letter he wrote to his associate and colleague Timothy, who had been sent by Paul to Ephesus to assist in sorting out some problems relating to doctrine, church practice and governance and other important aspects of Christian living in the early church at that time. It is one of the most misquoted texts in the Bible because we usually know it as 'Money is the root of all evil' but, in its correct form in 1 Timothy 6:10, it reads: 'For the love of money is the root of all evil', putting it in quite a different context.

Even though he admonished the Pharisees for their greed and avarice, he was not criticising

them for attaining wealth, or worldly possessions. He was admonishing them for forgetting why they were Pharisees. Jesus was not against money or any of the other worldly attainments but, rather, he was against people putting wealth first above God.

And this is really where the two parts of the text come together. The Pharisees were leaders charged with the care and welfare of their flock on behalf of God; in Jesus' language, they were the stewards of God's children and they had failed in that stewardship. Their focus on power and wealth corrupted them to the purpose of the synagogue (a meeting place of like-minded worshippers) and their role in the successful execution of the multitude of responsibilities that institution demanded. In his parable, they were the accountant working for the rich man; they skimmed off the cream, they corrupted the purity and they were found lacking. And, in so doing, they proved that they could not be trusted with the small things and, thus, they could also not be trusted with the greater things.

Jesus brought a new light to the worshippers, a new message untainted by that corruption, and he dismissed the Pharisees just like the rich man dismissed the accountant.

The very core of our text lies in the lines preceding that last statement: 'For unless you are honest in small matters, you won't be in large ones. And if you cheat even a little, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities. And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven? And if you are not faithful with other people's money, why should you be entrusted with money of your own?'

In effect, what Jesus is saying is that if you behave in a manner that is guided by the values of integrity and honesty in the small matters (what

Jesus calls 'good stewardship'), then you will also behave in the same manner in matters of far greater importance and consequence.

The sense of the proverb is that someone who acts faithfully in a small trust committed to him, does so likewise in a much larger one; and having been tried and found thus faithful, is entrusted with things of greater importance!

And what are those small matters that Jesus speaks about? Quite simply, they are the outer worldly matters; possessions, money, status and the trappings that go with such things. In the old biblical sense – mammon!

And what are the large matters? Jesus spoke always of obeying the laws of God – to love one another and God himself, but he extended this out in many of his teachings and parables to reflect a whole gamut of human experience; to seek to always improve the lot of yourself and your fellow man; to be truthful to yourself and others; to always deal with integrity in what you do and say.

For those of you who read the article I wrote for the December Templer Talk, you may remember my reference to a quote from Wheels Magazine attributed to the current Chairman Emeritus of the Tata Group, Ratan Tata and it goes thus, "I know I have had a good day, when I put my head on my pillow and can say 'I have done no harm!'"

But, in a conversation with my good friend Dieter Kazenwadel on our regular Friday morning walk, he added to that sentiment: "I know I have had a good day, when I put my head on my pillow and can say 'I have done no harm, and I have acted positively to help my fellow man!'" I think I would count that as a good sentiment to have and to carry with me every day.

There is a very concise commentary provided by Matthew Henry, who was a Nonconformist clergyman and the pastor of the Presbyterian congregation at Chester in England from 1687 until 1712. He wrote a book called 'Exposition of the Old and New Testaments' which is better known as 'The Complete Commentary on the Bible' (you can find it online by typing 'Matthew Henry Complete Bible Commentary') and, despite it being written in the 1700s, what he says is still relevant to us today.

'Let us be convinced that those are truly rich, and very rich, who are rich in faith, and rich toward God, rich in Christ, in the promises; let us then lay up our treasure in heaven, and expect our portion from thence.'

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Let us all stand if you are able and join me as we recite the Lord's Prayer.  
Our Father in Heaven,  
Hallowed be your name,  
Your Kingdom come,  
Your will be done on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins,  
As we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us when in temptation and deliver us from evil.  
For the Kingdom, the power and the glory  
Are yours forever.  
Amen

### **Hymn – *Mit Jubelklang***

We will close our service with the hymn '*Mit Jubelklang stimmt an das Lied*' (Oh come and sing the song of joy) which is hymn number 71 in the hymnbook. We shall sing four verses – verses 1, 2, 5 and 6.

### **Conclusion**

Allow me to thank you for having me here today and for listening so attentively to what I have had to say. My thanks to Victoria for her wonderful piano accompaniment (I truly feel a bit better this time as I gave her more than just two days to prepare).

Please join us in the adjoining room for a light lunch and allow me to wish you all a wonderful afternoon in the community of friends and family.