



Sermon: - 28th August 2016

Be careful what you wish for

*Sometimes getting what we want leaves us dissatisfied and empty.
If we concentrate on living the life God wants us to lead,
we might find that we get what we want anyway,
but not in the way we expect!*

An elderly couple were walking on a beach when they discovered a genie in a bottle. "You can each have one wish," said the genie. The wife made her wish first "I would like to travel around the world with my husband". Suddenly she was holding in her hand two tickets for travel around the world. Then it was the husband's turn, "Well" said the husband, with a naughty look on his face "I would like to travel round the world with a younger companion" . In a flash he became 20 years older!

Be careful what you wish for, it might just happen! If you had three wishes, or even just one wish, what would you wish for? Countless stories of wishes granted suggest that it doesn't usually turn out well.

In our Old Testament passage today we see a later instalment of a story which began when the Israelites asked for a homeland and God granted their wish. He gave them a land flowing with milk and honey. They lacked for nothing yet far from making them grateful to God they turned away from him. Jeremiah tells us in verse seven that God took them into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce but they defiled the land and made the inheritance detestable, the leaders rebelled against God and the prophets worshipped idols.

In the end placing their trust in their own wisdom and abilities led to their downfall. Jeremiah comments, "they have forsaken the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water". In turning from God and relying on their own wisdom they began to destroy the land that God had given them.

The Gospel passage has a similar theme. Jesus paints us a portrait of a wedding guest who wishes for significance, who wishes to seem important, but in trying to achieve this ends up being humiliated. The message of both Old and New Testament passages is the same. If we rely on our own resources to create the nice life that we might aspire to, or to try to give ourselves more significance, to make ourselves more important, to gain power and wealth, it will backfire on us. True happiness is found in a different way. Jesus challenges our assumptions about how to make ourselves more important; don't push ourselves forward. Jesus also challenges our assumptions about polite behaviour; don't offer hospitality to those who can repay you, your friends and family. Rather offer it to those who cannot repay you. The kingdom of God, as Jesus describes it, is radical, and challenges the norms of society, the society of his time and our society today. It turns everything upside down.

The short gospel passage describes two attributes which clearly Jesus thought were important, although they are not highly rated in society in general. The first is humility. Charles Dickens' Uriah Heep in the novel David Copperfield, takes pride in being "ever so 'umble" and yet it is clear as the story progresses that he is anything but. In other words you don't become humble just by saying you are, or by acting in a humble fashion. Real humility is actually very difficult and goes against our instincts. I think we are afraid that if we are humble we will be a doormat, people will take advantage of us, that we will be hurt. But that is not true humility. We can safely say that Jesus was humble, yet he was not a

doormat or a pushover. True humility is being honest about our gifts, attributes and status, but also recognising that everything we have and are ultimately comes from God, and therefore we have no cause to boast or push ourselves forward. The Israelites discovered that taking a pride in themselves rather than relying on God was not the way to create a successful and thriving society. And Jesus points out that if we do not think of ourselves as better than we ought we are more likely to be held in esteem by others. It's difficult though. It doesn't come naturally to us to put others first. And society tells us that if we are going to succeed we need to push ourselves forward. It rather goes against the grain to be humble in today's society just as in Jesus time, but Jesus tells us that true humility is the way to gain the respect of others and to be blessed by God.

The other quality which Jesus encourages in this passage is generosity. In many ways I think this is perhaps more difficult for us, certainly as Jesus describes it. Our expectations, our social norms are that we will entertain friends and relatives. Those who entertain us expect that we will in turn entertain them. We give presents and send cards to friends and family and expect to receive presents and cards in return. Indeed it can be embarrassing to receive a present when you haven't given one, or to give a present when you haven't received one. We struggle as a society with generosity for its own sake. Yet Jesus is quite clear in this passage, humility and generosity are marks of the kingdom of God.

So to return to our original question, if we had three wishes what would we ask for? What do we want out of life? To be rich? To be successful? To be happy? The call to be humble and to be generous does not mean that it is wrong to be rich or to be successful or to be happy. The point of today's passages is that the way to achieve all these things is the opposite way to what we might expect. If we seek first humility and generosity we may not be rich in monetary terms but we will be rich in the things that matter, the love and respect of those we care for. If we do not push ourselves forward we may not be successful in worldly terms but we will be successful in all the ways that matter; we will have a life that is satisfying and in which we can be content and respected by others. If we are generous to those who cannot repay us we may not find the happiness that the world offers but we will be happy in all the ways that matter, living a life that is fulfilling, having a clear conscience. The world's happiness is fleeting, transitory and an illusion, leaving us empty and always seeking more. The author Jack Higgins once said "I wish I'd known that when I got to the top of the greasy pole there was nothing there!" Conversely, in the last few years, researchers have looked at what they call the helper's high; the good feeling that we get when we do something kind or generous for no reward. They have examined this feeling and its effects on the human body. Scientists believe that performing good deeds affects our health beneficially, even to the extent that we might even live longer. So Jesus' call to be generous is a call to a longer healthier life.

Another story of three wishes and how dangerous they are. There was a poor fisherman who lived in a small cottage on the shores of a lake. One evening he was out trying to catch his supper when he caught a very strange fish. It was large and very beautiful. When he pulled it into the shore he was thinking what a treat it would be when the fish spoke to him. "Please let me go," it said. "Why should I do that?" asked the fisherman, "I am hungry and I want you for my supper!" "Because I am the king of the fish and if you let me go I will grant you three wishes." Well the fisherman was delighted and rushed to cut the net to allow the fish to go free. Once the fish was swimming free in the lake he turned to the fisherman, "what are your three wishes?" The fisherman thought carefully. "I'd like to have a beautiful young wife." There was a flash and he saw a beautiful young woman at the door of his cottage, calling him in for his supper. "For my second wish, I'd like to be wealthy and never have to work again," said the fisherman. There was a flash and the fisherman's clothes were transformed into the finest satins and silks. "And what about your

third wish?" said the fish. The fisherman thought for a moment. "I'd like to live in a home fit for a king!" he said. There was a flash and his humble cottage was transformed in an instant, into a stable.

For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Be careful what you wish for; be careful what you pray for. It might not turn out quite the way you anticipate. The apostle, in Hebrews, lays out a template for the right living that Jesus asks of us; Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters, show hospitality to strangers. Remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So, if we aim for a right kind of humility, not thinking of ourselves as better than we ought, but neither downplaying our abilities; if we nurture feelings of generosity, and give what we can when we can to those who are most in need, then we will find that our life, in tune with God's plan for us, will be more contented, that we will win the respect of others. Be careful what you wish for; let's wish for lived more in tune with God's purposes, and in doing so, find the path to true happiness.

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