

St James's Piccadilly  
7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
31 July 2022

GOSPEL – Luke 12.13-21

Last Sunday, on the Feast of St James, Lucy very kindly presented me with a shell, which had been blessed on the altar. A symbol of St James, pilgrimage, baptism, and faith, this beautiful shell now sits on my desk as a reminder of what a gift it is to be a part of the life of this parish and its wonderful people. Thank you for welcoming me – it's an honour to be here. As I begin to walk alongside you, I'm excited to get to know you. To listen and learn, with openness, respect, enthusiasm, and compassion. And if you've yet to hear my wise and friend Natasha Beckles' prophetic sermon from last week, I warmly recommend you take a look on YouTube!

My own pilgrimage brought me from Canada to the UK in 2003. If I can share one thing with you about Canadians, it is that maple syrup really, truly is a very big deal for us. I came to study theology at Oxford, for a year. In January, I will celebrate my 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the UK! I also had no intention of becoming a priest, but that's another story.

I grew up atheist, and started going to church when I was a teenager. I came out as queer at around the same time. When I went to university, I became chair of the university's Pride Society, the LGBTQ+ student group. My memories of that time are full of pride parades, drag queen bingo, co-hosting a radio show called Queerly Canadian, and arriving at church for choir practice on Sunday morning with some of Saturday night's glitter still in my hair.

One of my dearest friends from that time is a guy named Robbie. We've stayed close. He now lives in America and is discerning a call to be a priest. A couple of weeks ago, he married Andrew, who is also an Anglican priest. They locked eyes across a crowded chapel at Yale Divinity School. These two wonderful Anglican men delight in one another's love, and their wedding was a beautiful, sacred blessing not just for them and their families and friends, but to God's world and in God's heart.

Their wedding, and the wedding of my friends Jenny and Sarra, who were married in Edinburgh yesterday, gives me hope. Jenny and Sarra live in Cambridge, but they went to Scotland because gay marriage in the Church is possible there. I pray it's not long until the Church of England can offer the same sacramental generosity and dignity to queer couples, and I'm grateful that St James's is a beacon of hope for so many LGBTQ+ people searching for belonging and life lived to the full in the radiant joy of who we they really are.

While I was studying art history here in London, I was also working for the Church of England's Committee for Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns. Essentially, the national group who fought – as they still tirelessly do – for racial justice and anti-racism in a painfully institutionally racist Church. Yesterday the Church gave thanks for the abolitionist Oldadah Equiano. In his autobiography, Equiano explains: 'I was named *Olaudah*, which, in our language, signifies vicissitude or fortune also, one favoured, and having a loud voice and

well spoken.' It's powerful and profound that the African abolitionist writer Ottobah Cugoano, a contemporary of Equiano's, was baptised here at St James's almost 250 years ago. We must listen to proud Black voices, past, present, and future, and ensure their words motivate our actions for change.

At the centre of this life together for all God's people is the abundance of God at the altar, in the Eucharist. Every person is invited to this feast in which love itself is the nourishment. The bread of life and the cup of salvation are the simple yet extraordinary and mysterious things that, in our hands and in our mouths, help us to see that every person's dignity and worth are infinite and that, thank God, we cannot and do not control how God works and who God loves.

The love and labour of God are infinitely more expansive and generous than our own imaginations can fathom. This is very good news – it liberates us to love more, and to imagine a better future not just for those of us who are here. This liberation is a dynamic process within every person, now and forever. We can build a better world, here, today, at this Eucharist, in how we respond to the gift of love, and little by little we can continue that work together, inviting people to come with us, and to give and receive love abundantly too.

As I've been preparing to arrive here, making the long, long journey from my previous role at the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square a whole 8 minutes down the road to Piccadilly, I've been praying for you every day. The prayers I've offered have been shaped by what St Paul called the Fruit of the Spirit. These are nine qualities that we are invited to inhabit and cultivate as Christians, personally and communally. They are:

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Love leads them all. I have the word tattooed on my arm – feel free to ask me about that later. Countless people speak about love, and as Christians we trust that God is love. On the subject, Maya Angelou says, 'Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.'

In conversation with friends about Paul's list of the Fruit of the Spirit, we wondered together about self-control and earth justice. Self-control is not a restrictive and judgemental reticence. It's about discerning, lovingly, how to treat resources with care so that abundance is possible for all. It is the self-control that refrains from taking more than we need, so that none go hungry. It is the path to a simplified, less acquisitive and materialistic way of life.

Love, generosity, and self-control entwine in in this morning's Gospel. A man comes to Jesus, demanding to be justified and encouraged in his shocking greed. He asks Jesus to convince the man's brother to give him half his inheritance. Imagine this in relation to the Lord's Prayer. Instead of 'give us today our daily bread' it would be more like 'give me, right now, my bread, and permit me to steal my brother's bread as well. Oh, and also give me all the bread I need for my whole life, right now, so that I never have to ask you, or my brother, or anyone else for bread ever again. Amen.' The collective 'us' in the Lord's Prayer has become the insidiously individualistic 'I' in this case. The man does not trust anyone or anything, and greed is his only source of safety. His palpable fear of scarcity can only be combatted by stealing from and exploiting others.

The greed and pride in the man's interaction with Jesus is striking. It can also stir up compassion and empathy too. The man's behaviour is driven by fear – the only way he can imagine being happy and safe is to be alone, not exposing himself to relationships or participating in community, protecting and defending himself with the false comfort of having more than he needs. I asked a child what she thought of this man, and she said 'I think he needs a hug and to make some friends!' Amen. In the book of Ezekiel, God promises the people: 'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.' The man in the parable suffers from a terrible chronic condition – hardness of heart. We all know that the more generous we are, the more the virtuous cycles of generosity and abundance continue, and the more love abides.

At the end of the parable, Jesus contrasts those who store up treasures with those who are 'not rich towards God'. At the Eucharist we sometimes hear the phrase 'All things come from you and of your own do we give you.' The whole of creation, for all time, with our small beautiful mysterious lives within it, is God's gift. God chooses to offer this freely, abundantly, and joyously. The man in the parable has forgotten this vital reality. Being 'rich towards God' is a manifestation of the spiritual wealth and wisdom that grows ripe as the fruit of the Spirit. In each aspect of the gift of life and creation we are being asked what kind of world we would like to live in, and with whom, and why.

About a third of the parables Jesus shares are about money. It was a vital topic in his time, and certainly in ours too, especially in this parish and all its contrasts. In each case, when led by love, and not by fear, generosity is inevitable, and abundant. We are invited to be rich towards God when we support the people and projects that amplify God's story of love and justice in the world around us. God does not demand that we give more than we can. God's joyful hospitality invites us to offer what we can for the sake of a better world today, tomorrow, and long after we're gone.

When we pray together, 'give us our daily bread' we're giving thanks for God's gifts, and we're making a commitment to share them, as God does, so that every child of God can be fed. The abundance of the altar is the model of our generosity. When we are radically, counterculturally generous, we are, as the parable puts it, being 'rich towards God.' St James's is a unique, glorious, complex place where hope is strong, justice is sought, and love abides. I've arrived at a time of transformation and exploration too. Wherever the road takes us, we can be confident that God's own generous heart is encouraging us with each step. Amen.