

1 Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 4 August 2013 (Year C)
Hosea 11.1-11; Psalm 107.1-9, 43; Col.3.1-11; Luke 12.13-21

If you've read this month's *Reform* magazine, you'll have discovered that a lot of stand-up comedians apparently have clergy as fathers. In our own tradition, there's Miles Jupp. You may have heard Miles on the radio, trying to speak without hesitation, deviation or repetition on *Just a Minute* or seen him in that wonderful comedy series *Rev*, about life in an inner-city London church. His godmother is one Mrs Carolyn Brock. His parents, Peter and Elisabeth, are very old friends of mine; Peter trained for the URC ministry at Mansfield College a year or two ahead of me.. There are others - Hugh Dennis's father, for example, was a bishop. And although David Tennant is not always funny, certainly not when playing Hamlet (a grim humour, perhaps), he is the son of a Church of Scotland minister.

Why should this be? Is there something so serious about involvement in religious organisations that the offspring of the clergy react by turning to comedy in significant numbers? Or is it that there is something inherently comic about certain aspects of church life? As one brought up in a manse, I rather incline to this view. My childhood years in Christ Church Congregational Church, Clacton-on-Sea, were filled with what seemed to me to be a variety of eccentric, difficult, curious people, mostly very old, whom we encountered at church services or as visitors to the Manse, and whom my brother and I can recall even now in vivid detail. There was, for example, Mrs Crocker, who had sung in the City Temple choir in London and whose exaggerated movements of the mouth in the back row of our choir were a constant source of fascination to all the children, not least when one day her teeth fell out. There was Mr A.H. Mitchell, a small man, who said that because he could not be seen he liked to be heard and so his loud tenor voice was always a note or two behind everyone else in the sung Lord's Prayer. Best of all, there was Miss Alice Thomas, a lady believed to be of considerable wealth, and therefore of great interest to us, because she would sometimes open her handbag, take out her purse, and give us a

shilling or two. They were not, perhaps, up to the standard of the characters in the novels of Barbara Pym, with her subtle and knowing portrayal of churchmen and women in the genteeler Church of England in the 1950s. Sometimes they caused my father, the minister, real difficulty, even heartache. But their memory still makes me smile.

This train of thought began because of the reading from Genesis last week, which has some of the hallmarks of Jewish humour. God has decided that the people of Sodom are beyond redemption and will have to be destroyed. Abraham takes him to task, reminding him that he is supposed to be just. Should he be destroying the righteous with the wicked in this indiscriminate way? And using the techniques of repetition that have been the staple of comedians ever since, he whittles God down from sparing Sodom if he can find fifty righteous people in it to ten. Not many passages in the Bible are funny, but that is certainly one of them; funny and profound, as we learnt: an unbeatable combination in my book, because most of us learn better through laughter at human folly than we do from preachers going on and on about how sinful we are. This week's Old Testament reading is not funny, but it has something in common with that conversation between Abraham and God, and it is certainly profound. It's a soliloquy, a conversation God is imagined as having with himself as he wrestles with a similar problem, the persistent wickedness of his chosen people. Do I get any gratitude when I rescue them from slavery in Egypt? No; they worship local idols as soon as they get to the Promised Land. They deserve to be invaded and enslaved all over again, and the Assyrian Empire to the east is itching to do just that. But how can I let this happen? I taught them to walk, I held them when they stumbled. I won't carry out my threats, for I am God and not a mortal.

People get upset, quite reasonably, about all the violence and killing in the Old Testament, especially when God commands his people to exterminate their enemies. But today comes a moment in the evolution of the human understanding of God when God himself is shown as rejecting punishment as a solution to wrongdoing; when compassion outweighs anger; when wrath is set aside in favour of forgiveness and

mercy. I think we have to accept that some quite primitive understandings associated with a tribal God lie behind the killing fields of the books of Joshua and Judges in particular. But within the Old Testament you can also trace the emergence of a theology which is entirely consistent with that of Jesus in the New; most of all in the prophets. Hosea lived through traumatic times, including the invasion of Israel by the powerful Assyrian Empire. His private life was equally fraught. He married a woman who was unfaithful to him, but came to forgive her, and to see this as a parable of God's attitude to faithless Israel. Nearly three thousand years ago this man's theology was not formed by abstract debate or subjective feeling; it was purified in the crucible of political conflict and personal tragedy. In his own despair he sensed the despair of God at his recalcitrant people, and in his own capacity for forgiveness he found an image of God's abiding love for them. When you have brought up a child and the child grows away from you, follows a path which causes you pain, you do not stop loving them, and no more does God, as Jesus so memorably tells us in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

There's a different kind of argument in Luke's parable of the rich man and his warehouses. In her column in *Reform* this month Susan Durber warns us against assuming that the rich people Jesus criticises are only greedy bankers or venture capitalists, because we are wealthy beyond the wildest dreams of most of our sisters and brothers in the world. Christianity is not anti-material or world-denying; it cannot be, since it is founded on God's embrace of human flesh and bone in Jesus Christ because he loved the world so much. So we shouldn't read this parable as a simple attack on materialism. It's more about the way greed clog up the spiritual arteries. Jesus tells it in response to someone in the crowd who has asked him to sort out a family inheritance dispute. Jesus refuses to intervene: 'Friend', he says, 'who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' I can't help thinking that Pope Francis had these words in mind when he said recently: 'If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge?' Jesus goes on to warn against all kinds of greed because, he says, our lives do not consist in the abundance of possessions. However comfortably

we may live, it's tempting to think that a bit more wouldn't come amiss or that it would be nice to live in one of those grand houses featured in *Country Life*. So his target is not possessions in themselves, but the tendency we have to think that they are the key to happiness. The parable is deliberately and shockingly dramatic. The man who is pulling down buildings in order to put up larger ones to store his surplus, hasn't reckoned with the fact that his life is finite. I don't think the point of the parable is to scare us with death threats; it certainly isn't, if you attend to the message Jesus draws out and remember that it came in response to someone's request for him to intervene in an inheritance dispute. So when you are no longer here, God says to the man, who will inherit all these magnificent storehouses? Not you, that's for sure. 'You can't take it with you, can you?' And that is what happens, Jesus says, when we store up treasures for ourselves but 'are not rich towards God'. I find that expression, rich towards God, a fascinating one. What Jesus means, I think, is that we need to cultivate our inner, spiritual life as well as living with our feet on the ground. Emptiness within will never be satisfied with bigger profits. They are the wrong medicine for the hunger of the soul.

Maybe it's harder for us to be rich towards God than for any previous generation. We rush around, we are worn down by things undone; everything moves at such speed, the days and the weeks fly past, we get stressed and bothered and when we do have a bit of time off all we can do is fall asleep. The result is bound to be spiritual sickness; an undiagnosed, unrecognised longing for we do not know what, to bring us back to the centre. Helping us to recognise the emptiness within and to cultivate our inner lives is one of the most urgent tasks of the modern Church. All the great spiritual teachers tell us that we need to listen to inner voice, so easily drowned out by the white noise which fills up our time. They recognise that this is a difficult thing to achieve; it goes against the grain of what we imagine a successful life to be. But we are more than machines which consume whatever fodder comes our way. We have a dignity and a potential for growth which does not depend on the opinion of others or our economic success. It was that remarkable seventeenth-century writer Sir Thomas

Browne who, in his *Religio Medici (The Religion of a Doctor)* said: ‘We carry within us the wonders we seek without us: there is all Africa and her prodigies in us’. A century earlier, one of the Spanish poets, Francisco de Aldana, writing in an age when the treasure-ships came laden to Seville with gold and silver from the Americas week after week, urged his readers to undertake the conquest of what he called the great and richest Indies of God, that great world hidden from worldly sight.

We rightly celebrate all our human achievements and discoveries, but we still persecute and kill one another. Systems and procedures to safeguard the vulnerable, important as they are, can never guarantee that no child or elderly person will ever be abused by those who are supposed to care for them. The cure, in the Christian understanding, lies not outside but within, in that radical change of heart and direction we call repentance, in being born again to cultivate the gifts of the Holy Spirit as we grow in Christ. All humans are made in the image and likeness of God; each of us bears a spark of the divine, if only we can give it space and air to become a fire of love. That is the fundamental and good purpose of the Sabbath, the simple break in the routine which gives us the opportunity to set ourselves in the presence of God and discover what really matters. You remember Martha, rushing around and distracted? We need to find time to be Mary, in deeper communion with the Lord, to learn who we are and how we may become peacemakers, love-givers, builders of his better world. I am not there yet; not by a long chalk. But I am persuaded that by storing up treasures for ourselves and yet being in abject poverty towards God is neither a healthy nor a fulfilling way to live. Jesus is suggesting that we worry less about material possessions and invest more in the treasures of the soul, which will sustain us through times of difficulty and darkness and which will not be taken from us, not even when our lives here end. As Hosea came to see in his own struggles, the forgiveness, compassion and grace which flow from God are streams to refresh our hidden needs and guide our uncertain steps.