

Sunday, January 8, 2006

Living abundantly

Bible

Luke 9. 10-17 Feeding of the 5000

Jesus said: I am the bread of life. John 6.35

The disciples didn't have a lot of time to talk in private. When people knew that Jesus was in the area, they rushed to Him in large numbers. They soaked up his message about God's coming kingdom and wanted to receive healing. (11). In Jesus' presence they forget everything else, even their own hunger. As Jesus asks his disciples to provide food for the people, they list what they do not have. They only see their inability and list everything that is working against them. Then Jesus takes the initiative. The disciples should at least help to prepare for the miracle, and then everyone will have enough to live from. Everybody eats. Everybody receives enough. Yes, with God there is even an over abundance which is gathered together afterwards.

Salvation Army Bethel: Someone discards possessions which someone else needs desperately. F. v. Bodelschwingh, leader of a charity called "Bethel", took Jesus' example seriously (Even today you can read the verse above the door) "Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost." (John 6,12) If we only gather the fragments, there is enough to live from. This miracle and the example of Bethel are examples of charitable giving that all of us can learn from.

Millennium goal 1:

Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

- Target 1: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day
- Target 2: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger

Prayer

- We thank God for His Word and that it is our 'bread'. And for His Son, Jesus Christ, who is our 'Bread of Life'.
- We ask God to create hunger for His Word – in us, in our fellow Christians, in our fellow men. We ask Him for the 'Bread of Life', for Jesus Christ to make us helpful and to transform our lives.
- We ask Jesus, who provides for all of humanities' needs, to help us to recognise our own limitations but also to see the drops in the bucket, which we can provide. 'We want to depend on your possibilities – help our unbelief.'
- We ask for creative ideas, to help needy people at home and abroad. We pray for tender hearts, that we may give generously.
- We pray for people who serve the needs of others: that they won't be discouraged at the size of the task, and that God would put bread in their hands, which they can then pass onto those in need.

Monday, January 9.

Living in the light

Bible

Luke 2. 40-52

The twelve year old Jesus in the Temple

Jesus says: I am the light of the world. John 8.12

During a reception, an elderly British woman was talking to another woman. Because her eyesight was poor she didn't know who she was talking with until the woman's jewellery caught her attention. She looked more closely and discovered that she had been talking to Queen Elizabeth. Embarrassed she stammered: "Oh Madame, I am so sorry. But I didn't recognize you without your crown!"

Jesus as a child and youngster was like a king without a crown. Nobody noticed at first glance that he came from God's world into our world. Just like other children, he presumably played, learned to read and write and then later learnt his trade, as his personality matured. But as we take a closer look, you notice something special about him, namely his unusual understanding of God's will (v.40). This 12 year old wasn't sitting at the scribe's feet as a student but as one of them. His wisdom is clear and obvious, from the way he listens and asks questions and from his own astonishing answers. He lives in his Father's light and his Father's words and plans are all that interest him.

Millennium goal 2:

Achieve universal primary education

Target 3: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling

Prayer

- We give thanks for situations in which a light is lit, where Jesus as Light of the World helps us to walk forward.
- We pray that Jesus as Light of the World would light up our life.
- We pray for wisdom, to recognise and act upon God's plans for us personally and for our churches.
- We give thanks for good educational facilities.
- We pray for schools, for teachers in their important roles, for a good learning atmosphere and for Christian values in our educational institutions.

Tuesday, January 10

Living in a dignified way

Bible

Luke 8. 1-3 Jesus and his women companions.

God's name is: I AM THAT I AM. (I am here for you) Exodus 3. 14

Jesus chose a lifestyle without any financial security, but with a vast amount of trust in God. He kept "his" money in a shared account with his disciples. (John 12.6) and it only contained enough to cover their most essential needs. One source which Jesus and his disciples lived from was the hospitality of those who supported his ministry. (Luke 10. 38-42) Another obvious source was the women disciples. It is amazing that Jesus had women disciples at all, in those times. That was very unusual, because women were a marginalised social group; inclusion by Jesus dignified their position. The list of three women's names (alongside the 'many more') shows that even high society was represented in this group. They cared for Jesus and his disciples during their journeys, providing resources and encouraging them by their involvement. These women were in a sense responsible for Jesus and his fellowship's provision: and they covered those costs out of their own wealth. They were generous and hospitable. They were also present at the crucifixion and resurrection, and were the first witnesses on Easter!

Jesus upgraded the women's worth, and gave them back their dignity. Unfortunately it was many centuries before this began to be recognised in His Church. It is understandable that the pendulum of the women's rights movement sometimes swings in the direction that it does.

Millennium goal 3:

Promote gender equality and empower women

Target 4: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education no later than 2015

Prayer

- We give thanks for the gift of both genders.
- We are thankful for the contribution which many women still provide, in their availability to care for the needs of other's and for the many ways that women serve in Jesus' name.
- We ask that both genders might meaningfully complement each other and treat one another fairly.
- We pray that women's contributions would be given adequate respect and not just taken for granted.
- We pray for the people who help and walk alongside the oppressed and exploited women, helping them to receive justice.

Wednesday, January 11

Living with values

Bible

Luke 18. 15-17 Jesus with the children.

Jesus said: I am the life. John 11.25

Just before this short story about Jesus and children, Jesus describes how a Pharisee prayed. His proud prayer is full of self praise. Nearby, a tax collector, who, in the people's opinion, is an obvious sinner, realises that he is fully dependent on God's grace.

The lesson of the parable is reflected in the way that Jesus treats the children who come to Him. First we meet the pious adults, who want to protect Jesus from the children: this blessing would only be a waste of time. But not for Jesus – when children turn up, he takes time for them. They are precious people, not too small, nor incompetent nor ignorant. In God's kingdom Jesus includes the children absolutely. And then He defines the Kingdom of God in the most radical way. He doesn't say: "The children belong too": rather, He raises their status, and sets children up as the model to follow. "Whosoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child . . ."

Since then, many have reflected on what Jesus actually meant. Often He is understood to be referring to lifestyle lessons that adults should learn from children. Children are simple, humble, fragile, totally dependent on provision. But Jesus wasn't concerned with the children's personality: only with how they accept the kingdom of heaven. They are examples of trusting faith. We may ask as children ask, for food and love, and, as we do so, God fills our empty hands. This extraordinary love of God, which Jesus lived out, turned the world upside down. Jesus gives children the place of honour, in ways that society does not – do our churches?

Question: Why is this Bible verse almost the only verse used in children's talks or in infant baptismal liturgies? Jesus doesn't actually say a word to the children: He hugs them (Mark 10,16) - his words were directed explicitly to the adults.

Millennium goal 4:

Reduce child mortality

Target 5: Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate

Prayer

- We thank Jesus, that He **is** our life – and that He gives our life meaning, depth and eternal hope.
- We thank Jesus that He shows us exactly what grace is, through children.
- We pray that children will be taken seriously in our churches and communities. We pray that their fragility be respected in politics and the economy and that they may grow up in surroundings where they may remain healthy in body, soul and spirit.
- We pray for people who are serving children growing up in unhealthy circumstances worldwide.
- We give thanks for the tremendous love of life expressed by children and for their genuine joy.

Thursday, January 12

Living maternally

Bible

Luke 2. 6-7, 16-19 – A young mother gives birth.

God says: As a comforting mother, so will I comfort you. Isaiah 66.3

It was everything but a 'Silent Night'. The circumstances of the pregnancy – an unmarried virgin on a difficult journey to an inn without a spare room. And then the birth – her first, alone, in a stall, without any understanding female company to encourage and support this still single mother.

And nobody asked why
When the baby's birth was due
She moaned, quietly wept and suppressed a cry
As women do.

A groan went through the dark sky
The child lay helpless in the straw
Death was certain of victory
But it didn't stay so.
Manfred Hausmann

God enters this world in power. For the people living in such difficult circumstances, God wants to come. Just as He came to the shepherds, who knew what a manger was – nobody would have welcomed them into a palace. The young mother Mary, the shepherds and after them millions of simple people have discovered that God speaks their language and meets them in the midst of their daily lives. A motherly God, who meets others through the care of other people.

Millennium goal 5:

Improve maternal health

Target 6: Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio

Prayer

- We give thanks for the miracle that God's Son totally and fully partook of our life, in abject poverty.
- We give thanks for the miracle of new life, which mothers continue to mediate today.
- We give thanks for medical support and provision.
- We pray that mothers worldwide might receive counselling, support and care.
- We pray for people who come alongside mothers in their duties and for circumstances which will give them self confidence to fulfil their roles.

Friday, January 13

Living mercifully

Bible

Luke 10. 29- 37 The good Samaritan

Jesus said: I am the good shepherd. John 10. 11

Jesus taught and lived out a very practical theology. God shouldn't disappear behind dry doctrinal positions: rather, faith in Him should be seen in everyday life. 'Who then is my neighbour?' There are many that could qualify. Why should I show neighbourly love, when there are others that could get involved?

The priest came from Jerusalem, after leading an evening service. But was he interested in serving people, in his daily life? "He saw a man lying . . ." but he just didn't have any time. Or maybe he feared becoming defiled (Leviticus 21.1!). It could be that the man was already dead and the Levite had just finished his church service, and also performed in the temple. 'He too saw and passed by.' Was this such an incredible attitude among these leaders, who were leaders within their communities of faith?

And then the Samaritan turns up. Nobody expects him to help: they practice a kind of mixed religion, and aren't believers in "our" sense. But Jesus says of him: "But as he saw him he had compassion on him". His faith was practical and he **acted** by faith. His faith moved from his head to his heart, and into his hands and feet. Maybe the scribe was trying to avoid responsibility for action with his question 'Who is my neighbour'. Jesus turns his question around and asks at the end of His illustration: Which one was the neighbour?

Millennium goal 6:

Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

Target 7: Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS

Target 8: Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases

Prayer

- We give thanks for people who fight illnesses, especially the current pandemics in our world and we pray for courage for them.
- We give thanks for good shepherds, who lead us.
- We pray for proper help for the afflicted.
- We pray that our faith will not remain a theory, but, rather, that it will turn into practical help for people in need.
- We pray for those, who stand up for others and help them to live a humane civilized life.

Saturday, January 14

Living responsibly

Bible

Psalm 96 11-12 A rejoicing earth

Jesus said: I am the true vine. John 15.1

Rain forests are chopped down, trees lose their leaves, animal species die out, children have respiratory problems. . . yet the psalmist anticipates something else when he declares: 'Let the heavens rejoice and let the earth be glad, let the sea roar, let the fields be joyful, all the trees in the forest should rejoice.' I too like to imagine (in the early morning in the countryside, it is still possible!), how the forests will celebrate, as the branches rise up, waving their leaves, how a joyful field will produce grass, grain, flowers, and praise their creator, as the ocean does when it roars its musical scales – a raging, rejoicing, joyful, praising creation.

But then we all ask the economic question: How can I profit? Where can I profit as a person – or maybe we should be asking “How can I enter into this worship, and not only in church worship services, but how can I concretely treat creation, which God has entrusted to us, and for which He has given us responsibility? Where do I practice ‘profitable abstinence’ in order to protect His creation.

Millennium goal 7:

Ensure environmental sustainability

- Target 9: Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources
- Target 10: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water
- Target 11: By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers

Prayer

- We give thanks to God, who has entrusted us with such a wonderful creation. Through it, He reveals His creativity and power to us.
- We thank the ‘true vine’ Jesus who provides us with necessities for living.
- We give thanks to God, that life is possible and sustained by natural resources and raw materials, and only through these creation gifts.
- We pray for forgiveness when we consciously or unconsciously, actively or passively destroy or damage God’s creation.
- We pray that we might be responsible before God and learn protective care for His creation.

Sunday, January 15

Living in fellowship

Bible

Luke 19. 12-27 – The parable of entrusted wealth

Jesus said: Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me. Matthew 25.40

The servants are Jesus' disciples and the talent is his message which they are called to pass on, in word and deed. (13). It isn't clear what is meant by the cities (17 –19). The rich reward is striking: 1 city for 1 pound.

Was the careful one punished? We learn as small children to be reasonable, and not to risk too much. But the fact is that, if I don't risk anything, I will not gain anything. If I don't grab the chances and possibilities available to me, life passes me by uneventfully. Intensive, fulfilled life requires total commitment – for myself, for others, for God. We exclude ourselves from living if we allow the fear of failure to stop us taking any risks, or if we bandage ourselves up in cotton wool – in the way that the third servant kept his money safe and secure in a napkin. If we live like that, we face the danger of ending up empty handed.

Jesus knows when someone is over- or under- worked. That's why he didn't scold the second servant: "I expected more from you!" It is not about doing great things, but it is about being faithful in small matters, within my own limitations (17). That is why he wants us to make something of the lives He has given us. Carpe diem – use today. 'Do something with it, until I come.' Use your life, for the good of others, for your own good, and for the glory of God.

God will not ask us, on the day when he asks us to give account: Why didn't you act like Moses? Why weren't you as courageous and great as Elijah? . . . But he will ask us: Why weren't you (First and last name) faithful? Why didn't you invest, what I invested in you?

(Source unknown)

Millennium goal 8:

Develop a Global Partnership for Development

Prayer

- We give thanks to God for all the talents and potential that he has entrusted to us.
- We ask God for the courage to give, to risk, what we have and are, so that He might accomplish what He wants to through us.
- We ask for forgiveness when we have buried our talents, for whatever reason. God wants me to be charitable to my brothers and sisters.
- We pray for courageous decisions, when worldwide fellowship is required for the benefit of our neighbours and of creation.
- We pray that worldwide Christianity might stand up together for peaceful and just conditions. Together with Jesus (John 17) we pray for Christian unity, which strengthens us and our testimony to Himself.