



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (7th September) 2025

At first sight, the Gospel passage this morning seems to fall into two parts: first, the section on renouncing oneself to follow Jesus; and, secondly, a passage offering two examples of the necessity for foresight and planning. However, this latter part is concluded by a recapitulation of the first point and so, they are clearly intended to be taken together rather than as discreet ideas. So, we have to understand how to take these two propositions together.

One possible resolution is to say that to prepare oneself, one must renounce all one's possessions; but another more interesting solution is to suggest that one must renounce all one's possessions to prepare oneself: in other words, the preparation does not inhere in the renunciation of our possessions, but until we have done that, we shall not be in a position properly to prepare ourselves.

This latter interpretation seems to find support in the Old Testament Reading. When it speaks of the perishable body pressing down on the soul obscuring the vision of Wisdom, it tells us that the things of this world - including the life itself - impede our attempts to find Truth and the Will of God.

The resolution of possessions is a complicated issue in the modern world. The framework of society is predicated on the ownership of things; and whilst there might be something rather romantic about giving it all up, so long as everyone else does not do likewise and treat the material world as commonly owned, we shall struggle to live at all and certainly to flourish in a way that enables us to develop our discipleship in other directions.

We need, therefore, to refract the counsel to renounce our possessions through the lens of the concrete reality of our situation. When we do, we might see, instead, an imperative not to become beholden to our material possessions in such a way that they determine our choices and actions, shackling us when Christ calls us to lives, which are incompatible with the continued possession of our earthly chattels and status.

We come across an instance of this in the Epistle taken from Saint Paul's Letter to Philemon. Philemon has come into the possession of a slave - Onesimus - which means that he owns Onesimus in much the same way that he might own a horse or a house. What is unfortunate, to say the least, is that Saint Paul does not argue against the institution of slavery per se, but rather puts a bespoke argument for the particular circumstances.

Saint Paul points out that as a baptized Christian, Onesimus is Philemon's brother-in-Christ and in this situation notions of ownership have no place. Philemon is encouraged to renounce his temporal supposed ownership of Onesimus so that he can better understand what their proper relationship should be - as God would have it be.

It is easy to pick holes in Saint Paul's argument - not in what he says, but in what he does not say - but it does underline the point made in the Gospel that in following the life of discipleship, we need to be willing to leave behind our status and ownership of things if we are properly to prepare ourselves to understand what God wants of us. If we do not, then those things will likely cloud our judgements of God's Will.

Developing within ourselves sufficient detachment from the things we own can be difficult. Some of them are tied up with memories - perhaps gifts from or acquisitions connected with people we have loved. More broadly, we often suppose that we can find security and contentment in material sufficiency: a notion criticised elsewhere in the Gospels. Today, however, Jesus asks us to reflect that we shall not be able to respond to His call - or even hear it - if we remain beholden to the trappings of earthly life.