**PRIORITIES**

A professor stood before his class one day with a large empty jar. In front of him he also had three closed boxes. He opened the first box which was filled with golf balls and filled the jar with its contents. He then asked the students if the jar was full. They all agreed that it was. He smiled and opened the second box which was full of gravel. Shaking the jar a little every now and then so the gravel filled the spaces between the golf balls, he managed to empty the box of gravel into the jar as well. “Is the jar full now,” asked the professor. The students laughed and said it was *definitiely* full now. Again the professor smiled, and opened the third box which was full of sand. Again, shaking the jar from time to time, the sand filled the spaces left between the pieces of gravel. The professor asked if the jar was full. The students whispered amongst themselves, and then agreed that the jar was absolutely full.

Lastly, the professor emptied the jar, and asked a student to fill the empty jar with sand. When the student was done, the professor told him to now put in the golf balls. “But there’s no room,” said the puzzled student.

“Absolutely,” said the professor smiling. Asking the student to sit down, he then drew a parallel between the jars and life. He said that the golf balls represented the most important things in life, the gravel the less important things, and the sand the trivial things. He concluded by saying that if we allow our lives to be filled with things that are trivial, there is no room for what is really important. “Make sure that you prioritise what is important  *first,*” said the professor, “before you fill your lives with what is far less important.”

A great parable, don’t you think?

When I was thinking about today’s readings, this modern day parable came to mind.

All three readings today speak about priorities – God’s priorities, and our priorities, and how they interact.

Let’s look at Jonah first. Most of us will know the story: God called Jonah to go and preach against the city of Nineveh. Jonah absolutely did NOT want to do that! For starters, Nineveh was a Gentile city so to Jonah and his fellow Jews, it was a disgusting place! Though in Jonah’s opinion Nineveh deserved to wiped from the face of the earth, he suspected that he very fact that God was taking time to deal with them indicated that he might spare them if they repented, and there was *no way* Jonah wanted any part in their redemption.

So he took off in the opposite direction and boarded a boat for Tarshish. God caught up with him, brought him to his senses via a nasty storm and being ingested by a whale, until finally Jonah in his desperation to be spared from death, agreed to do what God said.

How God actually dealt with Jonah is an interesting study in itself, but we’ll look at that another time…

The story continues with today’s reading…..

**V1** Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:

"Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

God’s priority was to bring salvation to the city of Nineveh. He wanted them to repent of their evil ways, so that he could spare them and save them. He went to a great deal of trouble to bring that about.

Despite the fact that Jonah’s own priorities were contrary to God’s, God persevered, both with Jonah, and with the city of Nineveh, until his will was accomplished.

The outcome for Nineveh? We read in v 10: “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.”

We need to be careful not to allow our own prejudices and judgments stand in the way of what God wishes to accomplish.

It might be good to stop and ask ourselves occasionally, whether we are operating with any prejudice in our own lives? For example, are there people we won’t associate with because we disapprove of them? Perhaps their lifestyle or their political stance their religious beliefs – or lack of them offend us? Are we so choosey in our dealings with people that God has no opportunity to touch anyone through us?

So much can happen, and happen powerfully, when God’s people are in line with God’s plan. God chooses to work through us, and there are times when he will delay his purposes to bring a recalcitrant servant around (as he did with Jonah) – but it wastes precious time.

Our reading from 1 Corinthians picks up on this theme:

What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

When Paul says time is short, he’s referring to the return of Jesus. 1st century believers lived in expectation that Christ would return any minute – certainly within their lifetime – and it put a completely different perspective on their lives. We need to read this passage in its context to fully understand it. Paul is not suggesting that married people should separate, or that we should deny our emotions, or that we should divest ourselves of our possessions. Essentially what Paul is saying is that we should not allow matters of everyday life to distract us from God’s priorities, because there is so little time left on this earth.

I think that sadly, we have lost that sense of urgency today.

In Hebrews 12:1, Paul puts this thought even more clearly. He says, “let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

Paul is encouraging us to reflect and to *be aware* of the things in our lives which get in the way of us living according to God’s priorities.

**So what are God’s priorities?** We find them spelled out throughout the Scriptures, but today’s Gospel reading is a passage that puts it very succinctly.

Jesus says in v 15: "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

**There’s priority number 1**. Repent – turn away from your sin and turn back to God. And then believe the good news! The news that Jesus has come to make it possible to be friends with God.

**Priority number 2**  is in v 17. “Come, follow me!” said Jesus.

First, God wants us in a relationship with him. He wants our sin dealt with, and our faith firmly placed in him.

Secondly, he wants us to leave everything and follow him - not necessarily physically - but in the sense that we lose out attachment to those earthly things that would hold us back from doing his will. This is exactly where Paul was coming from in his words to the Corinthian believers.

**To follow Jesus – to *really* follow Jesus – means a shifting of our priorities.**

To really follow Jesus means that he becomes more important to us than our prejudices. God worked with Jonah on that one – he wanted Jonah to see that he wanted the Gentiles to believe and be saved as well as the Jews.

What prejudices do we carry, I wonder, that prevents us from wholeheartedly following Jesus? Are we unwilling to associate with certain people because we disapprove of them? Are we unwilling to get involved with certain activities in our church because we don’t approve of them?

To reallyfollow Jesus, means he becomes more important to us than our earthly relationships and our earthly possessions.

How easy it is – under the guise of ‘family commitments’ – to make our earthly relationships the centre of our world, leaving God on the fringe. Of course there is discernment to be exercised here. A truly committed follower of Jesus will love, honour and support his or her family – but we always need to be aware of how important Jesus is to us.

How easy it is - particularly when we are younger - to pursue material wealth, and then to become enslaved by it.

To really follow Jesus, he must be the most important reality in our lives.

**And finally, in this passage from Mark this morning, there is a resounding 3rd­­ priority.** It’s in the second part of verse 17. “come follow me,” said Jesus, *“and I will make you fishers of men.”*

Fishers of men – fishers of people. Jesus’ greatest passion was to bring people into the Kingdom of God: To introduce them to the Father. His methods were brilliant. Jesus didn’t just preach at people. He was the incarnation of the Father on earth. When Jesus touched people to love them, heal them, encourage them, teach them; when he had compassion on the poor and the alien and the outcast – he was touching them with the Father’s love.

We too are called to be fishers of people. Our greatest priority should be to bring people into the Kingdom of God. To introduce them to the Father. As Christ lives his life through us – as we *allow* him to live his life through us – we too are touching people with the Father’s love.

So how are our priorities?

Are we giving pride of place to the golf balls – those things which are at the heart of the Gospel – or are we filling our lives with gravel and sand, effectively crowding out the priorities God has called us to embrace?

Let’s pray.