

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



12th Sunday after Trinity
7 September 2025
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sermon by the Revd Canon Matthew Vernon

After that sobering gospel reading, you might be feeling you should give up all your possessions. If so, our Franciscan brothers and sisters will be glad to welcome you into the way of St Francis. Francis who gave up a life of wealth and embraced a life of poverty. Francis who took literally Jesus' serious teaching about the dangers of money. An older priest once said to me there's a Franciscan in us all. What I know for sure is I have more materially than I need. And that, in a culture of that idolises possessions, is a serious health risk for my soul. For me, this has been at the front of my mind after visiting Kagera and seeing again the material poverty of most people in that part of Tanzania. An older friend told me how his aunt was a missionary in Tanzania some years back. She used to say to visitors, "tell me what you need, and I'll tell you how to live without it."

However, I don't think this bracing gospel reading is primarily about that. So let me start again. Two clergy friends were catching up. "How are things in your parish?" one asked. "Great!" replied the other. "We've just had a parish mission." "How did it go? Have many people joined the church?" "It went really well. Half the people left." Seeing the confused look on his friend's face, he added, "the half that left were the ones that were coming to church for the wrong reasons."

A clue for this morning's gospel is right at the beginning. "Large crowds were traveling with Jesus". Jesus knew that the large numbers of people following him around had mixed motives. Jesus generated a lot of excitement and interest - what we now call a celebrity. The people following him around believed they might benefit in various ways. Some were looking for material benefits. Some were hoping for benefits from God. Some were expecting him to adopt their political agenda. Some were simply looking for entertainment. Jesus knew the human heart so he turns and rebukes them with fierce words about hating family, taking up the cross, giving up possessions. "Don't follow me unless you are committed to my path."

The whole of chapter 14 in the Gospel of Luke is about Jesus' awareness of motives: places of honour at a meal, giving a meal for people who can't repay, the parable of the dinner invitations and the excuses for not turning up. And beyond that chapter we remember Jesus in the wilderness: refusing the way of magic, refusing the way of status, refusing the way of power, refusing the temptations that can ensnare us.

Once in a monastery, a royal visitor was impressed by the number of monks. There were several hundred. The royal asked the Master, the leader of the monastery, how many disciples he had. "How many true disciples?" replied the Master. "Perhaps 2 or 3."

This gospel reading is for anyone who preaches the prosperity gospel, the gospel of material blessings from God if you have enough faith. This gospel reading is for anyone who preaches the comfort blanket gospel, the gospel of cosy protection from the troubles of life. This searing gospel reading is for anyone who preaches the feelings gospel, the gospel of God's presence being known through positive feelings. Those are mistaken.

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A few sermons ago I mentioned some Benedictine monks in the south of France. The monks who produce wine for the glory of God. An older monk has a clear sense of how life in the monastery differs to ordinary life - how ordinary life can get in the way of spiritual progress. The monks there learn to love God and neighbour, and to forget about receiving from God some consolations. At the beginning of monastic life the monks feel things, they feel consolations from God, how God helps in concrete ways, but that fades away, and they learn to live a life of faith, a life of self-giving, without receiving a percentage themselves. The monks learn to love the God of consolations, more than the consolations of God.

The various motives in the large crowds travelling with Jesus are in us too. As we grow in God, we grow in awareness of what shapes our lives and shapes our faith. Recently, a non-believer asked Rowan Williams what being a Christian is like. He said it's like every prop you've relied on being removed, until all that is left is the ground. It's like every prop, every buttress, every crutch you've relied on being removed by God, until what remains alone is the Ground of Being. Which props remain for you?