

SERMON FOR TRINITY 7 | 04.08.2019

Ecclesiastes 1: 2, 12-14, 18-23; Colossians 3: 1-11; St Luke 12: 13-21

One of the fashionable words in political life is the word 'Legacy'. You may remember all the fuss about the building of the Dome for the Millennium celebrations nearly 20 years ago, spurred on by Peter Mandelson. You will recall too all the hype and then the fall-out when visitor numbers failed to reach the expected targets. Now of course it is the hugely popular O2 Arena and all the worries have long since gone. But it was to be a legacy project: a gift from the past to future generations – like Boris buses!

This year, from May 2019 to May 2020 we are remembering another kind of legacy. This is more local to us at St James'. It is the legacy of William Lambe whose 1612 effigy stands at the back of Church over the west doors. During this year I want to look with you at the life and times of William Lambe, something of the faith that was emerging in England in the 1560s, 70s and 80s, and something of his amazing generosity that gave fresh water to Holborn (in Lambe's Conduit), a whole crop of almshouses for the elderly and hospitals for the poor as well as nearly 400 years of support for St James' Parish – first in Clerkenwell and then here in Islington.

But I want to start this occasional series with some thoughts about legacy.

Each week on Radio 4 there is a programme called Saturday Live, one of the co-hosts being the Anglican priest, Revd Richard Coles. Towards the end of that programme there is the chance for someone famous to talk about two 'inheritance tracks'; one a piece which they grew up with and one that they would want to pass on to the next generation. Maria's mother Alice was asked to do a kind of Desert Island Discs at her local Church recently and her inheritance tracks included *Danny Boy*, Glenn Miller's *American Patrol*, and Roberta Flack singing *The first time ever I saw your face*. These are some of the songs that have not only meant a lot to her but which she passes on for us to reflect on too.

I suspect that each of us has something significant that was passed on to us – by a parent, a relative or a friend... ??

As a parish we have inherited a pretty astonishing legacy. At some point in time, a team of people decided to build this Church - despite the fact that there was St Peter's, St Philip's and St Mary's just a few streets away. But then they found that the site was too small even for this modest structure and they had to pull down four alms houses to squeeze it onto the site.

Then there wasn't quite enough money and they had to persuade a whole crop of people to dip into their pockets so that we could have the bells, some stained glass and an organ.

Today's Gospel talks about the rich man who has so much of everything that he spends his time thinking of where he can keep it all. He wasn't so much interested in his legacy but in how he could make sure everything was in good order in his lifetime.

But John Bazley White, Master of the Clothworkers Company who laid the Foundation stone of St James' on 29 July 1873, had the future very much in mind. In his speech he referred to King Solomon and to all the people throughout the ages who have built temples for people to worship the Most High God. He said: *the object of building a Church is not for ambition or grandeur but so that a pure and undefiled Gospel can be preached to the time when we ourselves and our children and our children's children are no more*' and he went on to talk about William Lambe's self-less giving.

My question today about legacy, then, goes like this: what guarantees did John Bazley White and all the other Clothworker donors have that their vision for St James' would continue? What control did they have over the way the Church would develop? It might have gone in all kinds of directions that they didn't approve of – perhaps it has!

That is the beef of the writer of our first reading. Ecclesiastes is a strange book in the Old Testament and has quite a lot in common with the book of the prophet Job who loses everything – family, wealth and health. Job is a long book but it tackles that great challenge for all people of faith: what do we do about undeserved suffering?

And the answer that Job comes to is tough: there is no answer to pain and suffering except to realise that faith is not about being rewarded for being good but is the sign of our willingness to love God, come what may: in good times and in bad, in sickness as well as in health...

Ecclesiastes, written six generations later, about 200 years before Jesus, tries to push the same message by unsettling the complacent and the comfortable: just because you follow all the rules and are extraordinarily wise and law abiding does not mean that you will necessarily be happy. In that famous passage in chapter 3 often used at weddings and funerals (*there is a time for everything: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to mourn and a time to dance...*) the writer reminds us that life can be the pits. We work our socks off to achieve this or that. And then something comes along and wipes the whole lot away; or worse, changes the focus and direction so that it is unrecognizable.

As Jesus shows in this Gospel, at the very best we live a full life – but then we can't control what happens to all our goods when we die. They are inherited by someone who didn't do anything to achieve what they have received. The gardener hands over all those hours of labour without any guarantee that any of it will survive...

Legacy. Isn't it just another word for heartbreak? Isn't it the story of the prodigal Son all over again, the story where the younger son simply squanders all he had been given? Is it any wonder that the books of Job and Ecclesiastes are often subtitled 'the books of the pessimists?'

Or - we take the Gospel route! Looking at St James' and the fruits of all that effort nearly 150years ago (and of course lots more since) my reaction is not one of pessimism but huge gratitude, gratitude that people I never knew would entrust to us so much of what they gave so sacrificially. Entrusting it, too, without strings: no covenant, no legal stipulations, just free gift. Yours – yours to do with whatever you think best. On the understanding that you too are a steward and that at some point you will have to pass on that legacy to someone else – and on exactly the same terms. You won't be able to control the outcome either.

And that is what drives us onwards. Given the loving generosity of the past, we can do no other than to improve as best we can what we have inherited, in the words of John Bazley White, to our children and our children's children.

Why? Because love is inspirational, love is visionary and true love is trusting. Love believes that God is using us to fulfill his purposes - whether we can see the outcome or not. Indeed our lack of being able to predict the future is of no importance whatever. I Corinthians 13 talks of it like this: *Love is patient and love is kind; it does not envy nor boast, it keeps no record of wrongs but delights in the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres. Love never fails.*

And that is the key to it all. Love never fails. Of course we can get fed up when our luck seems to have run out, full time. Of course we are likely to get disheartened when our work is trashed and our reputation with it.

But we need to look at the bigger picture which often starts with what we have received: the legacy that has been put into our hands, freely and without strings.

Instead of falling into the trap of feeling unrewarded, we discover this extraordinary truth: that happiness comes best from giving – and giving without controlling. How come? Because that is the way that God works. He gave us life and love and much else besides. And he leaves these things in our hands to make the most of what we have received.

Hopefully, our legacy as the people of St James', will be to have taken to heart the extraordinary generosity of William Lambe and his successors and to make sure that tradition continues into the future. In the words of St Ignatius of Loyola whose day we kept last week:

**Teach us, dear Lord, to serve you as you deserve,
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labour and not to ask for any reward
save that of knowing that we do your will. Amen.**