



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

August 5, 2007

Pentecost 10, 2007

During the Second World War a man was stationed in the Philippines. While he was there he discovered how the Filipinos caught monkeys. They would take a coconut, cut the top off, drain the milk and empty it of flesh. Once the shell was cleaned out they would put in a handful of rice. The coconut was placed in the center of a clearing. Before long a monkey would come and investigate. It would find the rice and reach in to pull it out. As soon as the monkey grabbed the rice the monkey was trapped. The monkey then had two choices. First to open the fist, let go of the food, and pull out its hand. The second was refusing to let go. In its preoccupation with trying to figure out how to get the food and still get its hand out the monkey never noticed its captors until it was too late.

The monkey was faced with a choice and whatever choice it made would determine how the rest of its life would be lived. In freedom or in captivity.

I really believe that the story of the monkey is the story of all our lives. The choices we make determine how our life is lived; in spiritual freedom or in material captivity.

And if we say we have made a choice to be a follower of Jesus of Nazareth then our choices should reflect us trying to live how God would have us live in freedom, not in captivity. Not just about Sunday morning but about the whole of our life. Everything we do.

In today's Gospel story we have a man asking Jesus a question about an inheritance. It was quite normal for rabbis to be asked to settle people's disputes. But Jesus does-as Jesus always does-takes the question and uses it to make people think not about the inheritance to be divided but the deeper need, and the use of all possessions. He even uses a word from the Ten Commandments, (in public which I guess was ok in his day) when he warns his listeners to beware of all covetousness. Jesus goes on to tell a story about a man who is consumed with himself and his stuff. The man refers to himself no less than 11 times. What shall I do for I have nowhere to store MY crops? I will do this, I will pull down MY barns and build bigger ones and I will store MY grain, and MY goods and I will say to my soul look how good I am.

Now many of us do not think we have the problem of overabundance that this man faced, because for most of the time there seem to be not enough dollars to do what we want to do. But you know when we take a serious look at how much we have and what we have got we are extremely rich and that makes it far more important as Christians to set priorities and to make choices which will reflect our understanding of who God is, and what God requires of us. It will also reflect if we have chosen a life of freedom in God or a life of captivity to stuff. The choice will simply reflect if we have chosen to live with a coconut on our hand, clinging on to what we have, in pursuit of getting more in the race for the latest gadget or item that is on the market, and being captive to selfishness. Or we can let go of the rice and have a freedom that enjoys a dependence and a trust in God.

You see this story is not just about possessions. It is about a spirituality that finds reflection in the right

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understanding of possessions. It is about understanding that a person's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions but how we use and share the possessions that we have. We live in a society where most minutes of most days we are told that we need more stuff to make life better.

So we cling on to what we have and we find ourselves in the pursuit of more stuff. We work more hours. We go deeper into debt. We sacrifice time with our family. The so called American dream for many has turned into a nightmare.

So Jesus begs the question how much do we really need?

And at what cost?

A rich industrialist was disturbed to find a fisherman sitting lazily beside his boat. "Why aren't you out there fishing?" he asked.

"Because I've caught enough fish for today" said the fishermen.

"Why don't you catch more fish than you need?" the rich man asked.

"What would I do with them?" said the fishermen.

"You could earn more money" came the impatient reply, "and buy a better boat so you could go deeper and catch more fish. You could purchase nylon nets, catch even more fish and make more money. Soon you will have fleet of boats and be rich like me."

The fishermen asked, "Then what would I do?"

"Well you could sit down and enjoy life" said the industrialist.

"What do you think I am doing now?" the fishermen replied as he looked placidly out to sea.

So many of us are living life with coconuts on our hands that we are not able to touch or enjoy the good things that God has given every one of us. Often we are so preoccupied with what we think is self preservation that we do not see or even see the gifts that God is trying to give us.

How many rooms do we need? How many cars can we drive? How many meals can we eat? Is our life one of captivity, driven by keeping up with the Joneses? Or is it one of freedom lived by acknowledging what our real needs are, meeting those needs and being content.

I remember a story about a family playing a game of monopoly. The dad beat everybody so bad that they all went to bed mad at him. As he gloated putting the game away he suddenly realized that he had amassed all

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these houses and hotels, and practically all the money of the game. His family was mad at him and here he was putting it all back in the box.

No matter how many houses, no matter how much money, in the end it all goes back in the box. For all of us.

And in the end, when it all goes back in the box, will our hands be free of the coconut?

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