

Let me begin this harvest-tide with a Jewish joke:

A protestant minister, a Catholic priest and a rabbi were discussing how they made use of the funds in the collection plate. The minister said, "I draw a line on the floor and throw the money into the air. Everything that lands to the right of the line is for God; everything on the left is for me."

"That's pretty much what I do," said the priest. "But instead I draw a circle. Everything in the circle is for God; everything outside the circle I keep for myself."

"I, too, have a system," said the rabbi. "I take the money and throw it in the air, and whatever God catches He can keep."

Putting some of the harvest aside for God is as old as the hills. The rabbi knows this really and the Hebrew Scriptures have constant reminders that what nature provides for us is a gift – whether tangible or in the form of money, and so it is only right – indeed it is a duty or *mitzvah*, to offer some token of it back to the Creator. In the Old Testament this was called a heave offering or in Hebrew *terumah*. In the time of the Temple the priest symbolically raised the *terumah* and offered it to God at the altar (Exodus 29:27). The gesture of raising it is a powerful reminder of our place in the world as God's stewards and our gratitude to Him as the source of all life.

We continue that tradition today. At the Eucharist when the collection money is brought to the priest or minister, he lifts it up at the altar and says a prayer (based on 1 Chronicles 29:14):

All good things come from you and of your own do we give you. Accept and bless, O God our Father, these gifts, through Jesus Christ Our Lord.

The people of ancient Israel understood the blessing of all 'good things' as the product of a fertile and abundant land to be a sign of our covenantal relationship with God and with one another:

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. (Deuteronomy 8:7-8)

For without land not only has a person nowhere to live and no means of subsistence but no identity.

In Jesus' day the people of the land, *am ha eretz*, were the ordinary people who worked the land, grew and watered the crops, and served others. But as lowly as they were, and as despised as they were by the higher religious classes such as the Pharisees and Sadducees, they were not the lowest of the low. Below the people of the land were the so-called

'sinners', the dispossessed such as: shepherds, lepers, the mentally ill, lepers and prostitutes.

The black radical writer, Frantz Fanon called the dispossessed black people in Algeria the 'wretched of the earth'.

Mahatma Gandhi called the dispossessed people, the 'untouchables', in India, the harijan – the children of God.

Jesus called the dispossessed in Palestine, the 'meek'; and like Fanon and Gandhi he chose them to symbolise those who would change society and the world. Jesus' said shockingly and confusingly that it would be the meek who would inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5).

What did Jesus mean?

At one level the meek are literally the materially poor, those who lack any position in society. Unlike other members of his society, Jesus does not write them off because they have not been blessed by God, in fact it is quite the reverse. So, Jesus also uses the meek as to ensure those of us who are materially blessed reflect on whether we have been corrupted by these gifts or whether we are able to walk in humble obedience to the will of God.

So, how can we be members of the meek?

Firstly, as St Paul writes in his letter to the church at Corinth, by remembering to be generous, 'the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly' (2 Corinthians 9:6). When we give to charity in time or money or goods, do we do so thankfully? It is significant that St Paul describes giving as a 'ministry' – why? because the act of giving recognises other humans as people, made in the image of God.

Secondly, to be a member of the meek we have to look deep into our attitudes to material possessions. The point is dramatically made in Jesus' parable of the barns. It's easy to apply the parable about the greedy farm owner building bigger and larger barns to large multi-national corporations, to unbridled capitalism and the dangers of globalisation – and indeed it is true that often these large companies are a major concern. But the parable is also aimed at *us* as individuals and our attitude to our possessions.

When we moved house over a year ago to live in Linton, it was an eye opener just how much clutter we had gathered. I expect you have gone through the process of decluttering, it's not easy and you have to be tough with yourself. Perhaps you think, 'one day this will come in useful, so I'll keep it' or 'I have had this since I was a child so I can't get rid of it now' or 'I have to keep this to show off to the neighbours'. The key question is really, where does your heart lie, what fundamentally matters: things or people and God?

Jesus said to the questioner in the crowd:

'Be on your guard against all kinds of greed: for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' (Luke 12:15)

The rabbi in the story said, mocking himself, 'I take the money and throw it in the air, and whatever God catches He can keep.' But there is a truth here. In throwing the money in the air, the rabbi is releasing himself from the tyranny of possessions; God does catch what we offer up when we become members of the meek and dedicate a portion of our wealth to the vulnerable, the unemployed, all those in despair, the marginalised and to all those who think of themselves unworthy to be considered children of God.