



ST HELIERS CHURCH  
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



# TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

**5<sup>th</sup> November 2023, 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost,**

**Your will be done by Rev Dr Jordan Redding**

*Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, and the sun goes down and hurries to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow. All things are wearisome, more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing or the ear filled with hearing. What has been, what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has already been in the ages before us. The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them. **Ecclesiastes 1:2-11***

*Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the gentiles who seek all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. **Matthew 6:31-33***

We come today to the first petition of the Lord's prayer: "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as in heaven." As a way into this, I'd like to reflect a little bit on desire.

We all have desire. Some of our desires are very carnal. Desire for good food and drink, for instance. Desire for other human beings – sexually, but also more broadly in terms of friendship and a community to belong to. Desire for things. Useful things. Shiny things. Exciting things. Pleasurable things.

Some of our desires, though, are more abstract but no less real. Desire for power, influence, autonomy. Desire for belonging, meaning, purpose. Desire for beauty, truth, goodness.

We all have desire. Many desires at any given point. Often those desires can be in conflict with one another. One thing seems clear though: To be human is to have desire. And that desire if never fully satisfied is it? We have a tasty meal and our desire is satisfied for a couple of hours and then it bubbles to the surface again as hunger begins to nag at us once more.

And because our desires are always there but never fulfilled – characterised by a lacking – they're particularly vulnerable to being manipulated, distorted, misplaced, intensified. When we indulge our desires in unrestrained or unhelpful ways, they can have catastrophic effects both for the individual concerned, but also for those around them.

Unbridled desire can lead to crippling, life-destroying addiction. There are the obvious ones like drugs, alcohol, gambling. But there are other less obvious ones: sugar, technology, pornography, shopping, work. Some are more socially acceptable than others, but they can all be highly addictive and massively destructive as we seek to fill the void of our bottomless desire. A beast that is never satisfied.

And it's self-evident I think that when we indulge our desires in unrestrained or unhelpful, they can cause grave harm to people and planet as we reduce the world and everything in it to an object of our desire. An object to be owned. To be used. And to be discarded when it no longer gives us pleasure.

And the problem today is that we live in an environment that is actively encouraging us to indulge our desires in unhealthy and unrestrained ways. That's the whole premise of consumerism, right? That the way to satisfy our desires is by consuming more and more and more. Feeding the beast. It capitalises on our discontent.

I want to show an ad which recently featured on the bus-stop a few doors down outside St Philips [slide].

What's being sold here? Yes, obviously a car. But not just a car. What's being sold is the promise of influence, prestige, success. If you want to be more successful than your neighbour, if you want to be desired and influential, if you want to be a somebody and not a nobody -- then you need this new car. You see the way it manipulates?

Companies don't sell products so much. They sell ideas and feelings that tap into our deeply held longings and unfulfilled desires. If you want to feel happy, popular, influential – then buy this product.

I'm not telling you anything you don't know. But it's good to be reminded of it. Because this is the air we breathe today. And unless we name it for what it is, it just becomes normal. But this isn't normal. We live today in a highly manufactured environment that is intended to be addictive. That is intended to get us to try and fill the void of our desire with things. Why? Because there's money in it.

We might look at this particular ad and see it for what it is. But we also can't help but soak this stuff in by osmosis when we're surrounded by it every day. None of us is immune.

For all of the promise, though, these products and the consumer culture that underpins them have failed to satisfy the deepest longings of our heart. Desire for belonging, for

purpose, for dignity, for beauty and self-worth. Desire to love and to be loved. And so on and so forth...

The words from Ecclesiastes, I think, speak profoundly into our current climate. They lift the veil and call it out for what it is: vanity of vanities, all is vanity... What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. In other words, for all that we chase after the new thing that promises us meaning, purpose, fulfilment, belonging – there is nothing new under the sun, no answer to our restlessness. No way to fill the void of our discontent. It is all ultimately vanity.

If anyone should know this, it's us Presbyterians. In many ways I think we've embodied these words more than any other expression of Christianity. We're the pessimists of the Christian world.

If you look back on our history, Presbyterians were known as the fun police. Dour, humourless, frugal, pious, and moralistic. Everything in moderation. We've been shaped by a Calvinist work ethic on the one hand and a puritanical denial-of-self and denial of pleasure on the other. Self-restraint and hard work are the highest good.

It's easy to look back on this caricature with a grimace. And yet, at its best, our heritage reminds us of the truth voiced in Ecclesiastes today. That the pursuit of pleasure and indulging our every desire is not the path to happiness and contentment. The itch will never be itched. The void will never be filled. The consumer beast will never be satisfied.

We're learning today with renewed urgency, I think, the importance of living simply, within our means, in gratitude for what we have. Not just for our own wellbeing – our own peace of mind –, but for the wellbeing of others and of our planet. Our Presbyterian forebears may have been rather unlikeable. But they got this. Instinctively. We're having to learn it again.

That dour Presbyterianism is perhaps more of a welcome tonic today than we might realise.

That being said. Our Presbyterian forebears were by no means without fault. The legacy they have left behind is, at worst, a moralistic and litigious expression of Christianity that saw human desire – especially sexual desire – as something evil, something “of the flesh”, that needs to be denied, suppressed, and kept under tight rein. Such an expression of Christianity has been the cause of huge guilt, shame, self-loathing, trauma and distress.

The church is only beginning to reckon with this legacy, which continues to exist today.

Here's the thing. I don't think desire is evil at all. And I don't think it's healthy to suppress desire. Why? Because as we've said to be human is to desire. We can't simply turn off the tap of our desires. Or close the door on them and pretend they're not there.

The issue, I think, is not that we have these desires. The issue is that we've indulged them in unhealthy or unrestrained ways. They've become an end in themselves, untethered from God and from God's good purposes for us and our life together. God desires flourishing of life. God desires we should enjoy life with one another to the full. But when our desires get out of control, they can have the opposite effect, leading to lack of life and the breakdown of relationship.

There's a British theologian, Sarah Coakley, who suggests that desire actually reflects that we are made in the image of God. We are made by a God who desires to be with us and we are made for relationship with this God. And there is something insuppressible within

us that yearns to be with God as God yearns and desires to be with us. And this yearning and restlessness won't be satisfied until we are one with God and enjoy fullness of life with him in eternity.

How does our Psalm put it? As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you, O God. There is something deep within us that is constantly searching, yearning, hoping for flourishing life.

Remember that bottomless pit of desire that I was talking about? Maybe it's better thought of as a well. A deep, deep well, the source of which is the living God, the very wellspring of life.

Coakley suggests that when we pray, it's like we are tethering or orienting our desire to its truest source in God. We're aligning our desires with God's desires.

And the more we indwell that reality, the more we untether ourselves from the things that promise life but don't deliver.

There's something counterintuitive and yet profoundly radical about the prayer, "your will be done, O God", in a society that lives by the mantra, "my will be done."

It suggests that our contentment, the satisfaction of our deepest desires, are found not in living life for ourselves, but in living life for God and for others.

I'm mindful of Jesus who, on the night before his crucifixion, prayed to God: Father, not my will, but your will be done. In Christ, we see human desire truly oriented – in total love and devotion to his loving Father in heaven and in loving service to the world for whom he was about to die.

He is the fulfilment of that passage in Micah: what does God desire of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

This is what it means to pray, your kingdom come, your will be done. The more we pray it, the more we allow it to shape our thoughts and actions, the more that our desires will be aligned as we live in loving service of one another.

If we seek this first, Christ reminds us in our reading today, the rest will follow.

I suspect that this, rather than a Mazda CX-60, will have the neighbours looking over the fence at us with envy. There's something contagious about a vision of life lived in selfless service of one another, as Christ lives in selfless service of us. May it be so.

Amen.