

The Earthshakers

Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up: a servant who becomes king, a fool who is full of food, an unloved woman who is married, and a maidservant who displaces her mistress. – Proverbs 30:21-22

The Servant who becomes King

Meditations

Power

What is power? When we are children we think of the symbols of power: the crown, the throne, the uniform. Are they really power? When we grow up we see that the people at the top look – just like us. Imagine the Prime Minister giving an interview. Can you see him? He's wearing an ordinary suit, isn't he, ordinary shoes, no crown, no sceptre, no robe of ermine. There is nothing to mark him out as the holder of power, is there? Or is there? Look again. Look just a little wider. Do you see those two men in dark suits just behind? The ones with the gun-shaped bulge under their jackets? And that other man, over by the door, his eyes constantly flickering over the room, his lips muttering non-stop into his mobile. They mark him out. They are the sceptre, the robe, the crown, that every powerful person wears. And its name is Fear.

Real Power

Again, imagine the Prime Minister giving an interview. Can you *still* see him? See how relaxed he is? See how he seems to know the answers to all the questions – even when he avoids answering he still acts as though he could have answered if he'd wanted. Impressive, isn't it – an all-knowing leader. But almost out of sight, look, tucked away behind the security guards, just off camera – do you see them? In dark suits, two women and a man, each clutching a heap of papers, each muttering into a lapel microphone. Got them now? They are why he's all-knowing. They are his memory, his database, his encyclopædia. They tell him what to say – oh, obviously following the lines and policies he has set down. But they tell him what to say. Who has the real power?

Very Real Power

All I wanted was an appointment with the doctor. I'd fallen over, and my wrist didn't feel right. I walked up to the receptionist. She completely ignored me. I coughed and shuffled, and then spoke.

"Er... excuse me!"

She continued to ignore me.

"Excuse me, please!" I spoke a little louder this time. She condescended to look up.

"I'd like an appointment with the doctor."

"Why?"

"I've fallen on my wrist, and it hurts."

"Nonsense. Men are always imagining they've hurt themselves. Slightest twinge and they're running off to the doctor. He's a busy man, you know." She flipped open the diary. "It'll be the end of next week."

"I work at Smith's, so it'll have to be an evening."

"Oh, an evening." She licked her lips and flipped over another couple of pages. They looked blank from where I was standing. "The earliest I've got is the eighteenth. Six-thirtyfive. Name?"

"But that's nearly a month away! Isn't there anything sooner?"

"I've told you, the doctor is a very busy man. Take it or leave it – there's plenty of others who need it more than you. Name?"

After five minutes of personal cross-examination I finally got away from the desk. I stepped aside just as a woman walked up to the desk. The receptionist turned to her at once.

"Tracey – hi. How's Gweneth? Good. You've got a bit of a headache? Of course he can. I'll put you down for five o'clock tonight. The doctor's always got spaces on a Tuesday."

Prayers

A Few More Thoughts on the Servant who becomes King

We know this one, don't we. You can hear that whining voice now: "If it was just up to me, of course I'd let you, but ...", "I'm sorry, but it's more than my job's worth..." "I can't help the rules, I didn't make them." The crocodile tears streaming over the hidden smirk of power. Here's some more: "The public has a right to know" "We are just asking the question" "It's our duty" "You may think what you like, I'm just saying what the Bible says".

Yeugh.

The Fool who is Full of Food

Meditations

The Poor

'Blessed are the poor' or 'Blessed are you poor'? It doesn't seem to make much difference. Both are in the Bible, both are key points of Jesus's teaching, both have been used and misused and ignored at different times. And you know, both of them help the Church grow: when either phrase is active and powerful in the Church, the Church grows and blossoms. We can see it in the defeat of Arianism in the East; in the preaching of the early missionaries – Patrick, Columba, Cuthbert; in the spread of hospitals and open monasteries in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; in the response to Francis and his followers; to John Wesley and his followers; in the growth of the Church in Victorian England.

Is there a difference? Curiously, yes. When the Church has emphasised 'Blessed are you poor' she has grown, but has hardened, frozen, and split or crumbled. We see that now in our Churches in England, the crumbled residue of Victorian 'you poor'. It is – well, it's like the seed fallen on stony ground – as if the Church has grown upwards, but hasn't grown downwards – hasn't made any roots.

But when the Church has emphasised 'Blessed are the poor' – and even more when she has said 'Blessed are we poor' – she has grown flexible, responsive, loving, and with deep roots. And the Church has lasted.

Do we think of the poor as 'them' or as 'us'? Do we say 'Blessed are the poor' or 'Blessed are you poor'? Whose side are we on – are we rich or poor?

And if we say 'Blessed are the poor', and meant it, wouldn't we want to be poor?

Prayers

For Food

Our Father, which art in heaven,
Give us this day our daily bread
Give us tomorrow tomorrow's bread
Give us for life our living bread
Give us for ever and ever our eternal bread
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever.

For More Food

Lord, forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us
Lord, give us this day our daily bread
As we give to those who hunger
Lord, lead us not into temptation
As we tempt not others to covet
Lord, deliver us from evil
As we deliver others from evil
Amen

A Few More Thoughts on the Fool who is Full of Food

A fool filled with food – or variations on that from different translations. It is curiously difficult to avoid puns on fool and full or on fool filled and fulfilled – without any warrant in the original, as far as I know.

As with all this group, there are two points to be dealt with: first, that it is paradoxical for a fool to be filled with food, and secondly, it is damaging.

Paradoxical, because if folly is rewarded, how can it still be folly? If folly leads to riches, how can it be foolish? This paradox, that the God-fearing are poor, while the evil – the 'foolish' – are prosperous, weaves in and out of all the later books of the Old Testament, finding its great expression in the book of Job. It is never truly answered. The New Testament, on the other hand, rejects the paradox completely; here Jesus is poor, the Church is poor, and 'blessed are the poor'. In the New Testament, a rich fool is no longer a paradox, but the norm. The reason is, of course, that the New Testament has a wider vision, and is therefore able to reject the riches of this world as a measure of folly or wisdom.

The so-called 'Prosperity Christianity' cults, far from being developments of Christianity, are actually a denial of the New Testament, and a reversion to the limited, worldly vision of the Old. They represent a clear example of why the rich fool is damaging. The rich fool tempts away the innocent with promises of worldly profit, which after all in our society is the only measure of success. The poor wise hold on to a greater profit, but not of this world, and one that is not visible in the bank, or on the table.

The Unloved Woman Married

Meditations

Prayers

A Few More Thoughts on the Unloved Woman Married

Was she unloved before she married – an odious woman, as the Authorised Version put it, or is she unloved in her marriage, a woman hated by her husband as the Good News Version renders it? The latter seems the more popular, but I wouldn't rule out the former.

Why just a woman, and not a man hated by his wife? Perhaps because it was much easier for a man to divorce his wife than for a woman to divorce her husband in that society. I think, myself, that we shouldn't put too narrow a reading on this: it means anyone trapped in a relationship of any sort – sexual or not – which has turned past sourness to hate.

The Maidservant who Displaces her Mistress

Meditations

Prayers

A Few More Thoughts on the Maidservant who Displaces her Mistress

Obscure one, this. It would help if the translators knew what it meant, let alone the commentators.

Well, there's no point in simply duplicating a servant when she becomes King – I mean Queen – or the unloved woman married; so what are we left with? The only one that I can see is 'a maidservant who is pregnant before her mistress is' – but was the earth really shaken by Bilhah's pregnancy before Rachel's?

The best option for our purposes seems to be to take the reigning servant to be the servant who misuses the power delegated to him to reign over those his master should be reigning over; while the high maid is actually ruling over her mistress. Anyway, that's how I've chosen to take it.

Some Final Thoughts on the Earthshakers

Here we have a catalogue of absurdities. They go with those old prints of dogs dressed as lawyers, of old women in young women's clothes, of preachers with a betting slip sticking out of their pocket – totally unfunny to us, hilarious in the 1700's, or so we are told. They are things that are funny because they can't happen in real life. By definition, a servant can't reign, a fool can't prosper, a husband can't hate his wife, and a maid can't rank above her mistress.

Or can they?

At least, we can say that if they ever happened, the earth would indeed be shaken. But then, the earth shakes all the time.