

**1. Our spiritual and physical well-being are entwined!**

They are meshed together. You cannot have one without the other. That is the consistent message through the Bible which the church or the world often seemingly forget. Some people might spend their focus and energy on their material well-being – ‘what can I do or have that will make me happier?’ Or others might say ‘What does it really matter what we do with our bodies, or whether we care for the earth, it’s my spiritual life that counts!’ But those ways of living are not the ways of people of faith. We are called to live into our physical and spiritual lives in a fully *integrated* way.

**2. I know the trap is so easy for myself.**

I can be so easily drawn into thinking some thing or some money could make my life happier and more fulfilled. But equally, I can so easily overlook maybe the signs my physical body are telling me about how I am. I can fall into the trap of either thinking my physical goods will solve my problems, or ignore the messages my physical body are trying to tell me.

**3. The ancient Jewish people were very much in touch with the idea that the spiritual life affects the physical life, and vice versa.**

Noone really knows who the prophet Joel was (our Old Testament reading today). We don’t get a clear indication of when he lived and therefore what exactly was happening at the time. His name means ‘YHWH is God’ which maybe be symbolic. But his message stands full square with the message of all other Biblical prophets: ‘the way to your well-being is by following the one true God.’ It was part of our passage from Joel today, which Peter quoted on that first Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended and people were speaking in strange tongues (2.28-29):

*Then afterwards*

*I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;  
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
your old men shall dream dreams,  
and your young men shall see visions.  
Even on the male and female slaves,  
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.*

Peter immediately saw that the people were being blessed by the Spirit of the Lord, as Joel had prophesied. But today we also heard the words of Joel from *just before* those which Peter quoted. And Joel is quite clear: physical well-being is also on God’s mind (2.21-24):

*Do not fear, O soil;  
be glad and rejoice,  
for the Lord has done great things!  
Do not fear, you animals of the field,  
for the pastures of the wilderness are green;  
the tree bears its fruit,  
the fig tree and vine give their full yield.*

*O children of Zion, be glad  
and rejoice in the Lord your God;  
for he has given the early rain for your vindication,  
he has poured down for you abundant rain,  
the early and the later rain, as before.  
The threshing-floors shall be full of grain,  
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.*

God's abundant provision – we are celebrating harvest today! – is both physical and spiritual. They are entwined! That is what Joel understood. So turning to the Gospel reading.....

**4. A friend of mine with a broad New Zealand accent once started his sermon talking about what sounded like 'Muster Buggabahns'. Most of those listening weren't New Zealanders and wondered what on earth he was talking about! But he was talking about the central character in Jesus' parable today: the man who wants to build 'bigger barns' for himself, to store up his goods, and sit back and relax: Mr Bigger Barns!**

Jesus is giving a stark warning of the fact we all know (deep down) but find so difficult to follow: that storing up 'material wealth' for ourselves (whatever that might look like for each of us) is not the way to a fulfilled life.

Perhaps more than anyone in Christian history, St Francis of Assisi, has exemplified for us this truth in vivid terms. 4<sup>th</sup> October is the day we remember him (the close of the Season of Creation). What he showed us was that we need to *actively do things* which break our addiction to any idea that material possessions bring us fulfilment.

Early in his life, he wandered the streets of Assisi dressed like a court jester and drinking and partying with his friends. But one day out in the countryside whilst riding his horse, he met a leper. Normally he would avoid lepers at all costs (that was the traditional understanding of dealing with lepers). But for some reason, this day, he got off his horse. He gave the leper a silver coin and kissed his hand. A few days later, he decided to visit a colony of lepers and gave them each a coin, and kissed their hands. This positive action had defeated his fear: from then on, he cared for lepers.

Later in life, when he had decided he should give away his money, he went on a pilgrimage to Rome. On his way back, he met a poor man. Wanting to experience what it felt like to live in poverty, he asked the poor man that they swap clothes for a day, so that Francis could beg for alms at the gate of the church and see what it felt like. At the end of the day, they changed back their clothes. His heart had changed. He knew he need not fear poverty. (N.B. He was not condoning poverty though!)

And perhaps a story many of us know. One day, Francis, trying to raise funds to rebuild the church near his home, sold some cloth and fabrics of his father. His father, a wealthy man, was angered by this action, as Francis had not told him in advance. He went to the church authorities to report him. But Francis stripped off all his clothes in the cathedral where the authorities were, in defiance of any attempt to get him to return the cloth and fabrics. From that time onwards, Francis' course was set: to live for the poor and all creation (animals etc).

**5. What Joel shows us is that our material and spiritual well-being are entwined. What the parable Jesus gave us, of Mr Bigger Barns, warns us against is depending on material wealth for our fulfilment. What St Francis shows us, is that this is a deep 'addiction' within all of us, and can only be broken by our challenging it with real, positive actions.**

But where do we start? I find it so difficult. Each of us are in such different circumstances. How we break this dependence will be different for each of us. But break it we must. Let's reflect on this! [A small personal example if it helps: I like books and am very tempted to buy one if I see it and it interests me. But over the years, I have bought more books than I can read! Now if I see a book (on-line etc) I force myself to wait a few days before buying it: often I find after a few days, the interest wanes. I still buy books; but not as many as I used to!]