

True Wealth – 25th September

Amos 6.1a,4-7, 1 Timothy 6.6-19, Luke 16.19-31

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All our readings today say something about the use of our resources, individual, communal and corporate, from Amos we have a warning, he tells us of the punishment for decadence, self-indulgence, and excess, (all of which sound delightful but extravagant and unnecessary). He is taking aim at those in power in Jerusalem and Samaria in his time. The leaders of God's people who have been given power and authority and a mission, to tend to the faith of God's people and to strengthen them and care for them. Instead they tax the poor and use the taxes, not for the welfare of the people, but for their own luxury, so because they ignore the sufferings of others, those for whom they had a duty to care, they will go into exile and lose everything.

Much as we might like to spiritualise the message of our gospel reading, the story of the rich man, who is not named (perhaps so he can represent us, and be as us, when we read the story) and Lazarus we cannot do it, because the message is unequivocal.

You received your good things' Abraham says to the rich man and Lazarus in like manner evil things. This simplicity of expression belies its significance. 'You received.' You did not earn, or gather, or win, or produce. You received. The implication here is that every person's lot in life is, in some very real sense, a gift. (or perhaps for Lazarus almost a punishment).

No one knows why Lazarus should have received such a bad deal, but experience tells us he is not alone, there are many who despite their best efforts remain poor.

The message of the parable is clear: God will recompense those who receive a bad deal, and God has expectations from those who receive good things. It's not so much an option to help, more like an obligation.

For those with good things, how much easier it is to share when we recognise them as things received – not earned or gathered or won or produced. And for those who receive a bad deal – there is surely good to come.

Luke consistently records Jesus's words about money and about generosity. Right at the beginning of the Gospel is a warning for the rich - in the Magnificat: God puts down the mighty and sends away the rich; he exalts the lowly and fills the hungry with good things.

So Luke's readers soon learn that Jesus' gospel message is targeted to the poor when he quotes Isaiah saying, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. Again when he sends John the Baptist's disciples back to him to report Jesus replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: there follows a list of amazing healings 'and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.'

The rich are told to give to the poor, in fact to share, " Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." As Luke says, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.'

We have just looked a quick sample, of some of the many examples. of Jesus's teaching in Luke, who in particular, stresses the way the status of the rich and the poor is reversed in the kingdom of God. Considered together Jesus' teachings on money and generosity are really quite shocking and thought provoking. Luke really makes clear that the poor are a major focus of Jesus' teaching.

Yet if the poor have good news preached to them, the rich receive a somewhat different message. The rich young ruler who asks Jesus how he can inherit eternal life is told that he is to sell all he has and distribute the money to the poor. When this makes him sad ,because of his attachment to his wealth, Jesus comments that the rich tend to have more difficulty entering the kingdom of God than the poor. Like the rich fool, the wealthy who seek to store their treasure in ever larger barns cannot take it with them when they die. They may store up "treasures for themselves," but they are not "rich toward God".

Being "rich toward God" — and having "treasure in heaven"— is not about piety and prayer. It is about practical generosity selling possessions, sharing good things and distributing wealth to the poor. After he meets Jesus, Zacchaeus, who is rich from cheating so many, comes down from the sycamore tree, gives half of his possessions to the poor and repays anyone he has defrauded four times over.

We have to ask ourselves if there is something wrong with owning things and having money? No, it seems there are no problems with money itself. It's what you do with it that counts and how you use it.

The principles Jesus demonstrates in the story we started with, the rich man and Lazarus are clear, if we have wealth, it is likely to be a gift that we have received from a combination of both good luck and good judgement, so we need to learn to use our wealth properly because there are penalties for misusing it.

So far so good, but the rich man is being punished in a very extreme way – quite possibly, I believe an exaggeration in the story to make the point, because there is no mention of his being able to repent or be forgiven, and we already know that God allows for both, repentance and forgiveness. His torment is magnified and made all the worse when he realises that there is nothing he can do to help his 5 brothers to learn from his mistakes – even if someone rose from the dead. But for us, someone who offers forgiveness and new life has risen from the dead so we have no excuse not to change our ways

Paul's letter to Timothy reminds the disciples, and so us too, that genuine faith in God is incompatible with the desire for stuff and more stuff, or for material abundance. The longing for possessions is particularly damaging to our most important relationships, which are our relationship with God, our relationships with each other, and our relationship with our planet. As Jesus himself said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Those who place their hope in God will readily share what they have, and nurture their relationships, avoiding any kind of abuse or exploitation. Those whose sense of well-being is based on their wealth and possessions will never have enough; but there is no shortage of blessings for God's people. "For the love of money" says Paul "is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith".

In fact, our very future on this planet depends on all of us learning restraint, on knowing and accepting when we have enough and in learning the new life and lifestyle of finding our joy in enough.

The story of the rich man and Lazarus stands as a stinging indictment to us in our day as it did when Jesus told it, not only of the great confidence we place in financial security, but also of the drastic inequities between rich and poor that we still allow to continue to grow.

In this story, God's judgment on each of us has everything to do with how we use any wealth we have in this life and whether we care for those who are poor in our society. The temptation is to try and explain

away this account of how God will ultimately reward the poor and not the wealthy. But it can't be done the message is quite clear. Like the rich man's five brothers, we have been given all the warning that we need. Generous and sustainable living is what God requires from all of us.