

Sunday 25th September 2022, Eucharist

Amos 6:1a, 4-7, 1 Timothy 6:6-19 & Luke 16:19-end

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Today the lectionary readings ask us to wrestle with some important teachings about money. It's a topic which sometimes doesn't get much airtime in sermons, as we see money as perhaps something that is 'worldly' as opposed to 'godly'. But teachings about money, wealth, resource, riches are to be found all through the pages of Scripture, and it is something that we need to reflect on. It's not an easy subject, and it is something that sometimes we can shy away from because we know reflecting on wealth may require us to make changes to our attitudes and lifestyles. The saying 'put your money where your mouth is' isn't to be found in scripture, but we have a similar sentiment expressed by Jesus when he says 'where your treasure is, there your heart is also': the truth is that our priorities in life can often be seen as clear as day by a simple look through our bank statements.

I think the story of the rich man and Lazarus is a challenging story for so many reasons, but especially because most of us probably wouldn't actually identify either with the rich man, or actually with Lazarus the beggar. We hear the story and have pity for the beggar, and contempt for the rich man. We feel the rich man gets his just deserts, and the beggar also gets his reward. But the pedagogical technique used here by Jesus is one of hyperbole, an exaggeration, an imagery of extremes, not a literal truth, and therefore a story which ought to stop us in our tracks such that we reflect on our own position. It strikes me that the saddest fact of this story is that the rich man and the beggar Lazarus seem both to be completely lonely and isolated characters in life. Although they live in close proximity, there is no relationship, either of support and resource, or of friendship or companionship. If we see this story as simply about wealth and resource then I think we miss the point that it is also about relationships. Indeed, when the rich man begs Abraham to send a messenger to warn his earthly relatives about their impending punishment, he is almost asking that they be warned, as the Beatles song goes, that 'money can't buy me love'.

It is love that matters, of course. It is God's love that we preach each week, that we give thanks for in the Eucharist, that we try to radiate out in our lives. But this love also takes a practical form through the way that we treat whatever resource we have. In many churches, the 'Offertory' is a chance for people to make a physical monetary offering as part of their worship, and the gifts of the people are presented at the altar at the same time as the gifts of bread and wine as the Eucharistic feast is prepared. These churches will often use the quotation from 1 Chronicles: All things come from you, and of your own do we give you. It can be an incredibly powerful symbol of how we remember that nothing we possess is actually ours in the first place, and so when we give, and give generously, we do so out of a place of deep gratitude remembering all that God has blessed us with. Of course, most of us give money to the church, and to other charitable causes, through electronic giving. This is efficient, secure, and makes all kinds of things like Gift Aid so much simpler. Planned giving helps us to be able to have financial security and so make long term decisions, but I do think we lose something of the visual cues of bringing up a physical offering to the altar, of giving back to God what He has given us. It's something we will do next week in our Harvest Thanksgiving, and please, I urge you, be generous with what you bring.

Reorienting our views and behaviours about money is what Paul is supporting Timothy to understand, and this passage from the first letter to Timothy is one I do really urge you to revisit during the week. It is very strong in acknowledging that 'the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil', which is perhaps where we get this somehow very negative association with money as, in itself, an evil. But that is not what Paul says, and it isn't what Jesus says either. It is not the money that is the evil, it is the love of that money, the selfishness, covetousness, greed that money can evoke, that is the problem. Archbishop Justin Welby writes:

The more interconnected the world becomes, the more power is held over individuals and nations by economics, by money and flows of finances. Mammon – a name given by Jesus to this force – gains strength through our obedience. The more we let ourselves be governed by Mammon, the more power it has, and the more the vulnerable suffer.

Mammon therefore – this concept of God-given resource – is personified as an evil if we begin to worship it, to allow it to govern our lives to the detriment of our relationships with God and with others. But it is a gift. A gift from God, a gift we are supposed to share.

As Paul says, As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment/ They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share...

So what does this mean, practically for us, here? Our starting point has always got to be one of gratitude, and of acknowledging all that we have as divine gift. If our dominant attitude to giving is one of obligation, then we will fail to be generous. AS we say in the Eucharistic prayer, it is our duty AND our joy. As Jesus says, 'Freely, you have received, now freely give'. Without gratitude and without receiving resource as gift, we cannot be generous. An attitude of gratitude is a phrase I have heard, and I like it. God loves a cheerful giver is a phrase we read in 2 Corinthians, and I like this too.

Because out of this gratitude, flows an easier relationship to Mammon, our wealth, our resource. Somehow if it is not ours to begin with, the burden of responsibility feels lighter. Our grip on it feels less. Our desire for it feels weaker. We can be generous, because it isn't actually costing us – this is God's gift to us, and God's desire that we show love by sharing.

For our church to continue to flourish – that is for this building to be maintained, for our clergy and staff to be paid, for our outreach to all kinds of vulnerable groups in our community not just to continue but to expand, and for our support of the wider Church and wider charitable bodies to which we feel drawn to support, we depend on your giving. The Bible gives a suggestion of tithing – giving 10% of our incomes back to God. For many of us that might feel a huge jump from what we currently give! But for others that may be a commitment we have made for many years, and perhaps we can reflect prayerfully on whether we can give more. 11%, 12%, 15% or even more. It really is astonishing how giving in faith builds our dependence on God, our gratitude for all that we have, and, most importantly, builds relationships of love, and trust, and care here in our own community. The Parish Church Council met last week and were discussing how we can be more generous with supporting local charities and projects – such as our local Foodbank, West London Welcome for Refugees, Glasdoor and other groups. This is such an important part of our witness as Christians, that we use Mammon – our God given resource – to practically bless others.

If you feel challenged to reflect further, our Parish Stewardship Committee are going to be speaking to us over this Harvest Season about different ways of giving, including how to make provision in your Will to support St Mary Abbots. And I know the clergy would be very happy to help people think and reflect more theologically on this too, including suggestions of reading and resources for reflection.

Because, as the prayer says: *Yours Lord is the greatness, the power the splendour and the majesty. Everything comes from you, and of you own do we give you.*

Amen