

St Mary Abbots, Eucharist

Third Sunday before Lent

Jeremiah 17:5-10, Luke 6:17-26

Father Christopher

This morning's gospel is a difficult one to proclaim in Kensington; and it should be a difficult one to hear for most of us. Not just *'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God'*, but *'Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.'*

Clearly, not everyone here is rich. But even those of us who do not consider ourselves to be rich in Kensington terms, are probably rich in global terms. The global average annual salary, adjusted to purchasing power in this country, is £11,291. Just think how far that would get you anywhere in this country. And more than a third of the world earn less than \$2 a day. So almost all of us will fall very much on one side of Jesus's equation here: *'Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.'*

I remember being shocked when I learned that the Catholic Church teaches that the Church has a *preference* for the poor, and Pope Francis has taught that without that preference the proclamation of the Gospel *'risks being misunderstood or submerged.'* But surely we are all equally loved? God cannot prefer some of those made in His image to others, can He? And yet, it is harder for the rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

And the rich young man is told that all he has to do to follow Jesus is to sell everything he owns, and give the money to the poor.

Every evening we say in Mary's words from the Magnificat: *'he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.'* The words roll out of our mouths, but we forget their meaning.

The Western Church has come to believe in private property, but those rights are never absolute. As St Gregory the Great taught as far back as the seventh century, *'When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice.'*

St Thomas Aquinas even taught that for a hungry person to steal bread cannot be theft. Such ideas are not the result of trendy, left-wing liberation theology. They are part of the age-old orthodoxy of the Church.

The interests of justice are therefore always going to favour those in need over those with an abundance, and that is what is meant I think by the preference for the poor. It does not mean that God loves them more than those of us with plenty, but it does mean that because they are more in need in this life, He seeks them out particularly, as we should too.

The Church of England's ordination rite tells us that we are tasked with *'searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world, that the love of God may be made visible.'*

One might answer, that if God has such a preference for the poor, and they are so sought after by Him and by His Church, why are they still poor?

Well, the answer to that is quite straightforward. Firstly, we live in a fallen world. But also, while we might measure happiness and satisfaction according to our material comfort, in God's eyes the world is quite the other way around.

As much as we must recognise the real pain and agony of those who suffer in the world, and seek to alleviate it, those who are poor, hungry or weeping have little option but to depend on God; and the Beatitudes are clearly addressed primarily to those who are overwhelmed by the reality of their lives.

The rest of us can *try* depending on God, but when that comes in and out of focus, as we fall back on our material comforts, those *without* such relative wealth have nothing and no-one but Him to depend on. In that sense, we should all model ourselves on those who have nothing, for our wealth is nothing in God's eyes, in the context of eternity. And whether we have material riches or not, the values of the Beatitudes, of Jesus, all remind us to seek those things which are its very opposite. Which begs the fundamental question, 'What do you most desire?' Money or closeness to God? Because you cannot easily have both.

What is blessing for you? Prosperity, a large house and beautiful children? Or closeness to Christ? Closeness to Him in His suffering the very worst that humanity is capable of, in His Passion and His death. And closeness to Him in His care for those who are poor and hungry?

There is an aspect of this gospel that is about the afterlife of course. For centuries people's main purpose in life was, or ideally at least was, a good death and going to heaven. Many of us now have such an abstracted, philosophical idea of what comes after that it barely impinges on how we live.

How we live our life does however matter; what we do, and how we treat people, matters. And we cannot separate those things out from our attitude to God. Holiness, which we are all called to, is about our closeness to God; and we can only be close to God if we trust Him and depend on Him absolutely, hard as that can be. Jeremiah gives us a similar contrast to that in the gospel: '*Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals*' and '*Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.*'

I often find the faith of the poor far more direct in that sense. In the absence of worldly goods, or people, to rely on, of those who can cope, there is often a deeper wisdom of dependence on God. The rest of us strive for such a sense, to live out Jesus's words not to worry about tomorrow, but we will by default find it so much harder to trust solely in God, when we have so much worldly stuff to depend on before we think of Him.

This may sound a little patronising towards the poor, and there are clearly many poor who do not have faith or who struggle to such an extent that they lose what faith they might have had. I do not want to present an idealised image of the poor (and indeed to describe 'the poor' as though they are an amorphous mass is to fall into the Victorian trap of separating 'them' off as being other than the rest of us). But I do think this provides some explanation for the Church's preference for the poor.

In the year 258 the prefect of Rome demanded 'the treasures of the Church' from St Lawrence, the deacon responsible for sharing the church's goods with the poor.

His answer was to gather all of the poor and lame of Rome - the maimed, the sick and those stinking with poverty. And he said to the prefect: '*Behold, in these poor persons the treasures which I promised to show you.*' The prefect was so angry that he had Lawrence roasted alive, as the tradition goes. Whatever you think of these difficult verses – and we will all have our own interpretations of them – the one thing you cannot feel listening to them is comfortable.

We may have explanations justifying our continued comfort, but we cannot explain them away. And we cannot avoid Jesus's message that in being rich, we are probably spiritually poorer, and

need to sit at the feet of the poor and learn from them. As well as consider what we do with our wealth of course.

If we will only learn of our own true poverty, then we too might learn to depend on God; and learn too, that, as Jesus said to His disciples, when they asked Him how the rich young man might be saved, '*With God all things are possible.*'

Amen