

Sunday 14th October 2018
Trinity 20 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Amos 5.6-7, 10-15
NT: Hebrews 4.12-end
G: Mark 10 17-31

The Rich Man

The report “Reward work not wealth” produced by Oxfam for the economic summit in Davos Switzerland in January 2018 states that

“Last year (2017) saw the biggest increase in the number of billionaires in history, with one more billionaire every two days. There are now 2,043-dollar billionaires worldwide. Nine out of 10 are men. Billionaires also saw a huge increase in their wealth. This increase was enough to end extreme poverty seven times over. 82% of all of the growth in global wealth in the last year went to the top 1%, whereas the bottom 50% saw no increase at all”.

The CEOs of two of the world’s most prominent tech companies (both billionaires) got into an online spat on Friday over who was doing the most to address homelessness. The Salesforce CEO, Marc Benioff, and Twitter CEO, Jack Dorsey, were tweeting at each other about a proposed tax on high-earning San Francisco businesses. It would redirect millions of dollars to help thousands of people who live on the streets, including outside the headquarters of both companies. Benioff tweeted that he was in favor of the tax. Dorsey tweeted that he was not – prompting a displeased response.

The inequality between the rich and the poor appears to be growing with the gaps widening not just between the “developed” world and the “third” world but within our own country but sadly this is not a new phenomenon.

The Prophet Amos one of the Twelve Minor Prophets who was active c. 760–755 BCE at a time of relative peace and prosperity but also of neglect of God's laws. He spoke against an increased disparity between the very wealthy and the very poor. His major themes of social justice, God's omnipotence, and divine judgment became staples of prophecy.

Amos speaks of the cause of the coming judgment - the terrible way that the people of Israel treat one another, especially how the strong take advantage of the weak.

The weak having no voice in the gate, being robbed by oppressive taxes. The rich take advantage with bribes and pay off the system to drive the poor from justice.

The gate was the law-court in ancient cities. Israel's courts were so corrupt that they silenced the poor and righteous. The effect of this culture of injustice was that the prudent kept silent, godly and righteous people did not speak out either fearing retribution or knowing it would do no good.

Times are no different now almost 3000 years later. What was Amos's word to the people of Israel:

“Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the LORD God of hosts will be with you: Amos proclaims God's cure for Israel's sin. They must begin to simply seek good and not evil. They must transform their corrupt courts and establish justice in the gates.

The massive gap between rich and poor is even more marked today than it was in Jesus' time, so the words of the write of the letter to Hebrews, that the word of God is alive and active and cuts more deeply than a 2 edged sword, is really very true for us this morning. There is no getting away from Jesus' teaching, it is harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

These are confronting and convicting words and in the past people have tried very hard to find palatable suggestions of what Jesus really meant. One suggestion is that there may have been a gate in the walls of the city of Jerusalem called the “Eye of a needle” which was small and through which a camel could only pass were it completely free of the goods it was used for carrying. This was the theory many people have been told, there is no evidence of any such gate in Jerusalem and Jesus meant exactly what he said, you might as well try to walk an actual camel through the eye of an actual needle, the one you use for sewing your clothes, as to expect the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The seriousness of this teaching was not lost on the disciples, who then can do it? they ask completely without any idea. These men who have left everything to follow Jesus rather than being built up by this teaching and feeling vindicated that their place in heaven is assured, are, like the rest of us, shaken by these words of Jesus and wonder how it is that anyone will be able to do it.

Jesus tells us that for us it is impossible, but with God, everything is possible. Here is our answer, here is where Jesus is taking us. God must come first. Our relationship with God, our attitude, our heart, must all be fixed on God. With God all things are possible, with God a bank balance is not important. But if money is our primary concern, if the pursuit of wealth and a selfish clinging to wealth is what fills our thoughts and motivates our actions, we will miss God’s call to us. As Jesus said in one of his other many teachings on wealth, you cannot serve God and money like you cannot serve 2 masters.

Jesus speaks with such passion against money because it has the potential to disastrously corrupt lives. As we have seen, feeling poor compared to people around us can cause us a great deal of unhappiness, focussing on our wealth can draw us away from our relationship

with God. Wealth and possessions can be used to wield power over others and it can happen so gradually we don't even know we are doing it.

We put money first when we are consumed by worry about it, when we spend so much time earning it that we have no time for any relationships, not just with God but also with family and friends, we put money first when we are constantly looking at the next thing we want or need to buy. This is not about working hard and providing for your family, it's about doing it without forgetting why.

We earn money so that we have food on the table, a roof over our heads and clothes on our back. We use money as a tool to live, it is a problem when the pursuit of money is no longer a means to an end, but the end itself. Jesus is, of course, right. The only certain way of not being corrupted by money is to live without it altogether. But, as that is not possible for most people in our world, then we must keep God close by as we are exposed to the influence of the world.

Keeping God close through prayer and worship will mean we will listen for God's call to us in many situations and be ready to respond to it, even if that interferes with our worldly distractions. Keeping God close will keep us focussed on people, as God's created children, walking alongside us in God's own image, and their needs rather than focussing on the things that people have created to try to fill the holes in their lives, but that never really satisfy. Keeping God close will guide us with compassion through every circumstance, every encounter, every news report, and inform our prayers and actions.

Keeping God close, means there will be nothing in the world that can separate us from God, not money, not power, not distractions. Leading us, day by day, into closer relationship with our Father.

The question the Rich young man asked was “what must I do to inherit eternal life”

It is understanding that it is God who holds the keys to the kingdom, that we can't buy them or earn them, that they are a gift by grace to us. When we accept this gift, our outpouring of love becomes our gift to the rest of the world still struggling.

“what must I do to inherit eternal life”

What is impossible for us, is infinitely possible with God.

Fr. Bill Addy