

**Sunday 13 October 2024**  
**The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity 2024**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15**

**NT: Hebrews 4:12-16**

**Gp: Mark 10:17-31**

I thought I'd begin with something especially difficult. Not the doctrine of the Trinity. Not fine points of the theology of the eucharist. No, I want to begin with a real mystery: the laws of cricket.

Forgive me if you are not a cricket fan, I will try to make this quick and painless. In 2023, England were playing Australia in the Ashes series of test matches. In the second test, at Lord's cricket ground, Jonny Bairstow was batting. The ball was bowled, Bairstow ducked underneath it and it went through to the Australian wicket keeper. Bairstow thought that was it – the ball was dead and he wandered down the pitch. But the wicket keeper, Alex Carey, threw the ball and knocked over the stumps. Bairstow had left the safety of his batting crease, and he was given out. Stormy faced, he had to trudge back to the dressing room. Cue a huge controversy about whether this was the right decision or not. It was hotly debated by commentators, former players and umpires and across the internet. Perhaps a little gentle England/Australia rivalry may have influenced some people's opinions on the matter.

Now if you don't know anything about cricket, I may have lost you already; but stick with me. The point is this: most people agreed that, according to the laws of cricket, Bairstow was out. But some said that what counted was not the letter of the law but its spirit. Bairstow genuinely felt the ball was dead; there was no cricketing skill involved in the matter. Therefore, the Australians should not have claimed the wicket. They should have respected the spirit of the game and let it pass. Others took the view that the law is the law. Bairstow had no leg to stand on, and the Aussies were within their rights. It was his fault for being dozy.

The spirit versus the letter: it is a tension and debate that runs through so much of life. And it is not always easy to decide which to follow. In courts of law, we expect the law to be followed. But there still needs to be interpretation, context and possible mitigation considered. We can get impatient with a bureaucracy that seems to insist on pointless procedures and endless small print. But we cry foul when we feel the rules are not being applied consistently. When does appealing to the spirit of the law turn from a generous, humane and common sense approach to one that is slapdash or self-serving?

This tension is at the heart of the New Testament. It is Paul who writes that the letter of the law kills but the spirit gives life. As he seeks to chart a path for the church from its Jewish roots, he holds that the Law given to Israel is good and godly, but it does not have the power to save. It only convicts us of sin: we need the spirit, the grace of God given in Christ, to save us. And this allows us to dispense with various aspects of the Law as no longer necessary for salvation.

Here, the spirit seems to win. However, the church still had and has laws: moral, ritual, ecclesial. And it never advocated ignoring the laws of the land wholesale. A purely anti-law approach may appeal to freedom lovers, but it has little to offer concrete questions of justice and peacemaking.

In this context, we need to think hard about Jesus' words in the gospel. He tells the rich man to get rid of his possessions. When the man goes away with a heavy heart, Jesus tells his disciples how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

It has long been tempting for Christians to blunt the force of these words. One way of doing this is to emphasise the spirit of the words over the letter. We might say that Jesus is teaching spiritual poverty. He does not actually want us to have less possessions. He can't literally mean that rich people are less likely to be saved. So it must be a metaphor for being humble or generous or whatever.

Now there are times to take a less literal approach to scripture. But it has to be justified and can't be a general rule. In this, a spiritualising interpretation smacks of evasion. We want to avoid the uncomfortable challenge of Jesus' words. To put it bluntly: by putting the spirit above the letter, the rich get to stay rich and hang on to their possessions. All very convenient.

But how hard it will be for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. There is something about that saying that can't be spiritualised or sanitised. It is deliberately uncomfortable. Causing discomfort is an important part of the Bible's challenge to us. Jesus stands in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, represented today by our first reading, from Amos. Amos does not pull punches. He confronts real, material injustice. He challenges those who trample on the poor, who grind their faces, fail to pay proper wages, and push them aside. He points to the wealth such people gain from their oppression: houses, vineyards, land, money. He reminds them that none of it belongs to them and no religious high-mindedness is a substitute for justice.

Amos's message was spiritual, but in a way that embraced the material and the social. He reminds us that spirituality should not turn its face from poverty and injustice. If it does, it is little better than escapism and excuse.

That is true for Christians too. Jesus is constantly using images drawn from the social reality around him - unjust and absentee landowners being one very good example. He also speaks about money, generosity and the problem of riches directly. This should not surprise us. If Jesus 'fulfils the law and prophets', he will echo their insistence that spirituality has to speak to this world, to our real brothers and sisters, not to disembodied spirits. It is a message found through the New Testament. Think of the scorching words of the letter of James: 'Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you'; or when John writes that we cannot love the God we do not see if we fail to love the brother or sister in need that we do see. Using pious devotion to God to avoid the real material needs of others is nothing less than fraud.

We might say: surely our faith is about salvation for another world, given by a saviour who is divine? But that is only a half-truth. Jesus is as human as he is divine. He is not a spirit pretending to be human. He walks the same earth as us. God takes the whole of our reality seriously: body and soul. Justice and salvation are two sides of the same coin. When Jesus teaches us to pray for the kingdom, he does not talk about us going to heaven. He talks about heaven coming to earth: your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Still, we might think it all a bit unfair. There are rich people who are generous and enlightened, for instance. Of course. But still: how hard it will be for the rich to enter the kingdom. For being rich implies that many are poor. It implies inequality. It implies injustice. These are facts of our world, whatever the private generosity of this or that individual. It is not simply the inequality that matters, but the way riches frame our view of the world. The more we possess, the greater the temptation to see the world and its people as things to be owned and used. They cease to have their own depth and worth. This is especially relevant to us in this church, as many of those who attended in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century had links with the slave trade.

There are two important caveats to place down here. Firstly, there is no room here for self-righteousness and resentment. These simply foster more injustice and misery. Besides, many of us here are rich in global terms. We all share the responsibility for helping a more just and equal world come into being.

The other caveat is that Jesus words are prefaced with something unique in Mark's gospel: 'Jesus, looking at him, *loved* him'. Nowhere else is Jesus' love for an individual so directly stated. It reminds us that his judgement is one of sadness, not of hate or rejection. It is an invitation to think and live differently. Conversion is always possible.

This is how Jesus speaks to us all: in love. But love is not an easy option. It only heightens the challenge. How do we live in and from that love? Where do we get our riches and possessions? What do we do with them? Which of them do we need to give up? No doubt these are very personal questions. But they link to vital structural ones of human dignity and equality in the sight of God. Riches and poverty are not individual matters. They are ways

we organise and divide up the world, its power and resources. In the kingdom of God all power and division is undercut by the radical gift and generosity of God's rule. Truly, nothing belongs to us in the last instance. We take nothing with us. The way we hoard things and set up inequalities is a betrayal of this truth, an offence to God and a denial that we are all equally made in God's image.

It is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Let us rethink what we possess and how we possess it. We cannot buy our way into that kingdom. It is a gift without price. And that gift is only the beginning of our responsibility.

**Fr Steven Shakespeare**