

Downing Place United Reformed Church
Sermon – Sunday 29th September 2019.
The Revd. Dr. John P. Bradbury.
Amos 6: 1a, 4-7; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16: 19-31

The lectionary compilers will not let us get away from wealth and money at the moment. Or, rather, Luke, as he unfolds his gospel, won't let us get away from money and wealth. From the get-go as he recounts Mary singing her song, Luke lets us know that this gospel – this 'good news' has things to say about money and wealth. "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty". As Luke recounts Jesus first sermon in Nazareth, the good news is for the poor, as he reaches for the words of the prophet Isaiah.

And, of course, it is not just the lectionary compilers or Luke who won't let us get away from this theme, it runs through the whole of scripture. This morning, we get the examples of Amos, railing against the rich of his society, and of the writer of 1 Timothy declaring that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.

But for Luke, it is a theme he returns to again and again. We've already had various stories from him. The Prodigal son – where the son demands half the father's wealth, wishing the father dead in the process, spends it on dissolute living and ends up living with the pigs – who nonetheless gets a welcome home, deserved or not. And then last week, we heard Lance brilliantly expound that extraordinary story of the rich man and his bad manager. But note – we know all these stories and their characters by their relationship with one another, or their role in the story. But none of them have a name. What was the name of the prodigal son? We don't know, he's not a George or a Jack or a Bartholomew. The rich man with a bad manager – well – the fact I have to relate it to you in that form shows that this is not quite the same as talking about the story of Zacchaeus. In these stories about the rich and their exploits, Luke gives us no names. It is as though he is talking about categories of people – 'the rich', or, 'the dissolute' and so on. And that rather continues in this story. There is simply 'the rich man'.

Except for Lazarus, the poor, lame man at the gate. Lazarus has a name. Lazarus is not 'the poor man', or 'the lame man', or 'the unlucky man'. Lazarus has a name – Lazarus is an individual. To have a name, and for a name to be used points to the uniqueness of each individual human. It is not for nothing that in systems of oppression, we replace people's names with numbers. But this story concerns not a number, or a category, but a Lazarus.

The rich man, however, is just the rich man. That generic kind of rich man. Unthinking. Self-absorbed. We get the picture.

And so, we could unfold from here a lovely romantic picture of the poor – each an individual, each made in the image of God. And we could reflect at length on our individual responsibilities to those less fortunate than ourselves and extol the virtues of charity. When would all be fine – as far as it goes.

But central to this story of the rich man and Lazarus is the sense that the rich man has not paid attention to the scriptures. He begs for relief in his hell, which does not come. And in this very strange conversation he has with Abraham, he asks that Lazarus might be sent to warn others of what might befall them if they behave like he does. And at that point he is told that everything he needed to know he did know – it was in Moses and the prophets.

And at this point, we realise that this cannot be simply a story about personal morality. Yes – in part. But not when taken in the round. For Moses and the prophets are not concerned simply with individuals doing charitable things, they are concerned with the whole way a society lives together and is structured such as it is a place where all, including the least, can flourish.

Amos is certainly not for holding back. Alas for those who lounge on their beds of ivory and their couches! Which gives us a flavour of how Amos approaches the topic of wealth and economic justice. He unfolds in his text a deep concern for justice, that the rich must stop oppressing the poor such that the rich get ever richer and the poor ever poorer. He was concerned about the way society had become structured such that the divide got ever larger. For money does not simply equal luxurious living – it also equals power.

One commentator has noted some interesting archaeological evidence from Samaria, capital of Israel in the period in which Amos was probably written. In the 10th century, archaeology suggests that most of the houses were the same kind of size. By the 8th century – a couple of hundred years later, there were a few very large houses, and then many more smaller, more cramped homes. This suggests, of course, that patterns of the distribution of wealth had shifted, society had become less equal. From a situation where most people lived in similar conditions, some lived in luxury, and others struggled. Amos prophesies that this will not end well, and indeed, but a short time later the rich leaders of the society are carted off into exile in Babylon as Israelite society is overrun and crumbles.

And all of this sounds remarkably familiar, does it not? In 2018 in the UK, households in the bottom 20% of income had just over £12,700 income per year. In the top 20%, average incomes were nearly £70,000. The richest 10% of households own 44% of the wealth in the UK, the poorest 50%, by contrast, own just 9%.¹ The injunctions of Moses in the law to practice jubilee and relief of debts, not to charge interest, to care for the poor and the widowed, and the injunctions of the prophets against injustice and opulent wealth go as unheeded today as they did in 8th century Israel. Rather more so, in fact, I'd hazard. And it does not take a genius to work out that where these kinds of levels of inequality within society pertain, social unrest and political turmoil will follow close behind. When people are forced to choose between feeding their children or themselves, where they are left waiting for weeks with literally nothing when they lose their job through no fault of their own, when people choose between food and heat in the dead of winter, we have reached a place that becomes socially and politically intolerable and will boil over one way or another. We see precisely, I'd suggest, some of that boiling over in the corridors of power at the moment. Behind the Brexit crisis, and the crisis facing the practice of our politics, lies in considerable part, a crisis of inequality.

Because money is not just a root of all kinds of evil in terms of our personal lives – though it certainly can be that, as most of us if we're honest will admit. It is also a root of all kinds of evil within society as a whole – something Moses and the prophets are very aware of. Something that rich man would have been aware of, if he'd taken heed. Christianity has at moments the tendency to see it either only as a personal matter – about what I give of my money to help others, or as a social matter – the systems we allow to develop socially and politically around us. But it is, of course, both. For whilst Moses and the prophets are quite clear that their concern is about society as a whole, so this rich man in our story lies condemned in hell because *he*, personally, did not act. And in this midst of all of this, we have Lazarus. The man with a name.

For the statistics can and do point us to think about the way the world is, the economic structures of the world and the social structures we create and inhabit. And we are called to recognise that just as Lazarus is named, special in the sight of God, so each person sleeping in a doorway in Cambridge has a name and is created in the image of God. So each family attempting to survive life on Universal Credit before it's even begun to arrive, is named, special and created in the image of God. Our call as followers of Christ is both personal and individual, and social and political. And let us freely acknowledge just how difficult it is, many days, to know what that means.

Money matters. What we do with our money matters. It matters individually, and it matters collectively as a society. It matters when we do our own personal budgeting. It matters when we stand at the ballot box. It matters because the scriptures are dripping with references to money and wealth – and the dangers of money and wealth. Scripture will not let us get away from it. Jesus will not let us get away from it. We might wish that he did not tell inconvenient stories about a place called hell and a rich man who ended up there, and the fact that the problem was he hadn't read his bible properly. But unfortunately for us, he did tell this story. And Amos did rail against an unjust society and the lazy rich layabouts of his day. And the writer of Timothy did go to great lengths to tell us that the love of money is indeed a root of all kinds of evil. We would do well, I would suggest, to heed all of this. For individual lives, and the life of society, does indeed plunge into hell when the rich get ever richer, and the poor tumble into destitution. God calls us to live differently. God calls us to the responsible use of wealth. God calls us to seek justice and equality. For that way, in the words of 1 Timothy, we might stand a chance, in the power of God's Spirit, of taking 'hold of the life which is really life.' Amen.

¹ <https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/scale-economic-inequality-uk>