



Sermon preached by Dr Alan Rickard on 25th September 2021

Trinity XV Harvest Festival

Readings: Amos 6: 1a, 4-7; 1 Timothy 6: 6-19; Luke 16: 19-31

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable in your sight
O Lord, our strength and redeemer. **Amen**

Today's lectionary readings are a timely reminder that as individuals, plutocracies and nations some of us have grown rich from the past and present resources of the earth and as a result of the physical labour of others. It is incumbent on us all therefore to use these riches and resources wisely and not to neglect our less well-off neighbours. Neither should we further abuse the planet, not only for the sake of ourselves, but for the future of mankind on this planet.

In the books of Amos and Hosea we have the original words of these prophets addressed to the people of Israel in the eighth century BCE. As prophets they are seen as predicting future events, not just of the imminent future but also of distant events associated with the coming of Jesus. Prophecy is sometimes spoken of as a gift of the Holy Spirit relevant to the immediate contemporary situation and is meant to teach or warn Christians.

The prophetic preaching or prophetic task of the church, for some, means condemning injustice by individuals and by society. Amos has much to say about the social evils of his day. He calls on those who are powerful to do what is right and threatens them for failure to do so. We have to listen carefully to what his words meant in the circumstances they were first spoken, and to consider how they were preserved and used in later generations in order to apply them to our situation today.

In today's Old Testament reading from Amos chapter 6, the prophet is railing against the nobility and in particular the nobility of Samaria, or the Northern Kingdom. He condemns their complacency and reveals their luxurious way of life at court when they were supposed to be offering worship to God. They are eating lambs from the flock of the best quality and stall-fed calves, i.e. the 'fatted calf'. They have an inflated opinion of themselves as musicians. "The revelry of the loungers shall pass away" refers to the fact that the feast they have been enjoying will come to an end and indeed will be seen to have been a funeral feast instead of a joyous one! Evil and violence have been crowned instead of Jahweh, or Jehovah. Partying by elites in straitened times. Does that sound familiar?

Let us now turn to the epistle reading from the first letter of Paul to Timothy.

Known to biblical scholars as the pastoral epistles, Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus blend sound practical advice with theological statement. The injunctions served to both Timothy and Titus regarding their responsibilities have served as a pattern for Christian ministry. Yet, as Donald Guthrie in his commentary reminds us, much of the material seems to be directed at those communities to which Timothy and Titus were ministering. They throw light on the practical problems of early Christianity in the first and possibly the early second centuries AD. Until the nineteenth century these letters were regarded as the authentic work of Paul. However, from 1807 onwards, firstly on stylistic and linguistic grounds, many scholars have challenged this authenticity. Subsequent work on the historical framework of the letters and then on their theological differences from Paul's other ten letters also suggest that Paul could not have been the author. However, not even the strongest critics of authenticity have been

able to deny the Pauline basis of the Pastoral epistles' theology. These letters are unambiguously directed at the contemporary situation in Paul's final days.

Today's lectionary extract from I Timothy begins with the perils of wealth.

We are firstly reminded that:

“there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment. We brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it. If we have food and clothing we will be content with these.”

Skepasma, the Greek word translated here as clothing, or raiment, actually conveys the meaning of covering material and hence may suggest shelter as well as clothing. We are then reminded that those who pursue riches fall into temptation; here is the origin of the maxim that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. The apostle is not so much thinking of those who are already rich, but those who aspire to it; of those whose desires are set upon the acquisition of wealth. In life we should pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Such powerful words!

And as for the rich in the present age, Timothy's letter exhorts those who are already rich not to be haughty, not to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches but rather on God. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, be generous and ready to share.

And finally today's gospel reading from Luke. The story of the rich man and Lazarus is widely seen as one of Jesus's parables and is the only one in which a named character appears. Ironically it is the poor and wretched man named Lazarus that is mentioned by name and not the 'important' man, i.e. the rich man, who is dressed in purple and fine linen and feasts sumptuously every day. He is the patrician in an essentially two-class world consisting of patricians and plebeians, those who are free and rich and those who are enslaved and poor. Like many of Luke's teachings in the central section of the gospel, the issue is not one of intrinsic wickedness, but of neglect. In life, the rich man has neglected the impoverished state of Lazarus. The name Lazarus is itself a form of the Hebrew *Eleazar*, meaning “the one God helps”. Eleazar was the third most popular name in Jesus's day, according to Bauckham, hence it is a fitting name for a stereotypical poor man. Lazarus is placed at the gate; in Israel this is the place where judgement is properly rendered. Even Lazarus's sores are licked by dogs.

Both men die. Lazarus's soul is escorted by angels and lies in 'Abraham's bosom'. Abraham is mentioned fifteen times in Luke's gospel, playing a particularly important role as the father of the family of salvation. Especially included in Abraham's family are people who are hurting and outcasts. The callous treatment of the poor man Lazarus in life contrasts with his treatment in eternity. The rich man wakes not in Heaven but in Hades. Second Temple Judaism believed that the blessed and the damned were able to view each other from their respective positions. Following physical death, the souls of the departed were understood to inhabit an interim state in Hades, that included a separation of the unjust from the blessed, prior to final judgement. James Edwards in his Commentary on Luke compares what happens to the rich man with Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge is required by the Ghost of Christmas Past to revisit his early life. The rich man is required to remember his past and realise that it determines his present state. The rich man however still perceives Lazarus as a servant, asking that Abraham firstly sends him to cool his tongue and then to warn his five brothers of their fate if they do not mend their ways. Abraham addresses the rich man tenderly as “my child” but nonetheless points out that if his brothers do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced by someone who rises

from the dead. The rich man has made his choices in life and Abraham cannot change their consequences. Salvation is not the result of a spectacle or sign but of a response of faith.

The parable teaches us that wealth and possessions, like allegiances to masters, spouses and the Hebrew bible, are given their rightful place in life and fulfil their purpose when they are made subservient to the sovereignty and service of God.

Thus in conclusion, from Amos's portrayal of the elites in eighth century BCE Zion and on Mount Samaria, via Paul's letter to Timothy and his contemporaries in the first century Roman Empire, that the rich should do good and be rich in good works and to store up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, to Luke's account of Jesus's parable of the rich man and Lazarus, may we on this Harvest Festival Sunday render all our gifts, learning and accomplishments to work for the greater good of our neighbours and world-wide society. God grant that in so doing we no longer abuse our only home, planet Earth. May it be so.

Alan Rickard

Reference material used to compile this:

Mowvley H *The Books of Amos and Hosea* 1991

Edwards J P *The Gospel According to Luke* 2015

Guthrie D *The Pastoral Epistles* 1957