**29th September 2019**

**Luke 16.19-31, Amos 6.1a, 4-7**

Many churches around this time will be having harvest services, (ours is next week). One favourite hymn is ‘All things bright and beautiful’. The original hymn has this verse:

The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them high and lowly,  
And ordered their estate.

Modern people are a bit uncomfortable singing those words and they have been omitted from most hymn books. Are they appropriate? Are they true? How should we respond when we see people living in poverty around us? Has that been ordained by God? Do you just have to accept your estate – how God put you on this planet.

My wife and I have just had a real treat for our 25th wedding anniversary by going on holiday to Peru. It’s a beautiful country and the Peruvians are lovely people. Yet there are huge disparities in wealth and opportunity. The indigenous Peruvians seemed to be on the bottom rung of society. The European looking descendants of the conquistadors are the ones with the money and the cars. All the adverts on TV and on billboards have European looking people selling the goods. There seems to be wide divides in Peruvian society and limited access to social mobility and prosperity.

As white Europeans we were given great hospitality by the indigenous Peruvians but as ever when you visit a developing country you feel awkward at your comparative riches and their poverty. It was fair game to be treated as a walking wallet and we wanted to support the local economy with our tourist dollars – though our guides encouraged us to do that by buying stuff local people had made or paying for services local people offered, rather than just giving money to beggars – thereby preserving dignity and the connection between work and pay. But the inevitable questions remained: we are only affluent by the random chance of being born into an affluent country. The world isn’t fair. Do we just count our lucky stars and say that’s the way the world is? Or are we motivated to bridge the gap and stop the chasm widening?

Though many of us have grown blasé at regular warnings about ‘our last chance’ to deal with environmental crises, we now face the spiritual challenge of irreversible harm to creation.

The folktale employed by Jesus refers us to the spiritual traditions we have neglected, and their relevance to the great divides in society and life under threat.

The reposting on EcoCongregation’s webpage which attracted most attention, was [an article on 'climate anxiety/grief’](https://www.nbcnews.com/health/mental-health/climate-grief-growing-emotional-toll-climate-change-n946751). This didn’t concern itself with those whose homelands are already laid waste. Rather, it highlighted the devastating effect on mental health of those living relatively secure lives, finally coming to terms with the loss of a global ‘happy ever after’.

It’s part of the accusations that we shouldn’t be encouraging or troubling our children and young people with this climate crisis message. We don’t want them to feel guilty or uneasy. Part of this, is that the grim, likely, future comes **without** the comfort of attributable malice: that ‘we’ only have ourselves to blame? We lack the scant consolation of being victims of injustice. The Rich Man in this parable is not ‘punished’ but his life’s achievement is the digging of the pit that prevents Abraham and Lazarus, should they wish to help him, from doing so.

In an age when people can feel uncomfortable talking about hell and heaven, it is tempting to make the parable of the rich man and Lazarus fit for modern tastes. We might say that it is not to be taken literally, but as a series of metaphors about the importance of sharing and being kind.

Of course there are intellectual reasons why people don’t believe in God and life after death. But there are also personal reasons why people don’t want to believe in God and life after death. They don’t want to be held account for the decisions they make in this life. It is not for nothing that British people live atheistic lives because they have heaven now.

At the time of Jesus some of his audience would have taken the judgement of the resurrection very seriously, expecting judgement on the basis of their behaviour in this world. Jesus’ parable challenges us to think hard about how we live here and now.

In Jesus’ time, community would have been central. To deny alms, monetary help, to someone one was in relationship with was a denial of that community.

Perhaps that is the rich man’s greatest sin. He is self-indulgent and ignores his relationship with Lazarus. Lazarus is at the rich man’s gate every day; they would know each other and yet the wealthy man denies their community. We who have been blessed with abundance, act as if we are disconnected. We may not be so absurd as the rich man, but we are blessed, and are separated from the world. Who is at our gate that we ignore? What are the big divides in our society which are harming our neighbourliness?

The purples and fine linens worn by the rich man in Jesus’ parable, and his sumptuous feasting, are the embodiment of what we today call ‘conspicuous consumption’. While consumption is an important driver of modern consumer-capitalism, there are those who are critical of such behaviour as anti-social – although it is usually those dressed in hoodies and trainers rather than those clothed in Versace and Jimmy Choo who are subject to anti-social behaviour orders. Such conspicuous consumption is sometimes described as ‘affluenza’. Is this a fatal disease for society?

The poor man is called Lazarus, a Greek version of the Aramaic name Eleazar. It means ‘God helps’. This may call to mind the pitiful phrase ‘God help them’ that some people utter when confronted with a sorrowful situation, and contrasts with the non-biblical proverb ‘God helps those who help themselves’. The latter was popularized in an eighteenth-century book by Benjamin Franklin entitled *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. It was widely available and reprinted many times in England, and was reputedly distributed by some clergy to poor parishioners.

We don’t actually know the name of the rich man. The traditional name ‘Dives’ is merely the Latin word for rich man, although ironically that is derived from a word meaning ‘blessed by God’. Should we not use our blessings from God to help the poor?

The nameless rich man knows the poor man’s name. Does this make his neglect even more damning? Is it easier to toss some money into an anonymous beggar’s box at the side of a street and move on? Or give to charities addressing ‘real’ poverty in the developing world rather than to those on our own doorsteps who, we might be inclined to think, have probably brought their problems on themselves?

The parable speaks of a ‘great chasm’ fixed between Lazarus and the rich man in the afterlife, but there are those who suggest that there is an increasingly great chasm fixed between rich and poor in this life, both globally and locally.

There is a great divide in our society, in our communities, in our families even, between the leavers and the remainers. This debate seems to be getting out of hand. After the prorogation of Parliament was declared unlawful by the Supreme Court the prime minster and his government decided that attack was the best form of defence and rather than apologize accused Parliament of not fulfilling the will of the people to leave the EU. Tempers flared in the house of Commons with accusations made that language used in this debate is becoming more hysterical and inflammatory- pointing out that one MP, Jo Cox, has already been killed due to people’s rage over this matter.

These are dangerous times we live in for our society and our sense of neighbourliness. I was reminded this week of Stephen Covey’s insight in his book Seven Habits of highly Effective People, about win:win negotiations

Covey’s argument is that in any human interaction there are four possible outcomes of what he calls a transaction: win-lose, lose-win, lose-lose, win-win. In each case the first describes how you come out of the transaction, while the second describes how the other person comes out.

Let’s imagine I’m trying to sell you my car. Outcome one: I convince you that my old banger is an absolute gem. After buying it you realize I have swindled you. I win, you lose. That’s a win:lose outcome.

Outcome two: you persuade me that demand for my car is dropping, so I’d better let you take it off my hands. Afterwards I realize you have swindled me : I lose, you win. A lose:win outcome. This concept is illustrated rather nicely by Proverbs 20.14 ‘It’s no good, it’s no good’ says the buyer, then off he goes and boasts about his purchase’.

Outcome three we try to negotiate but things turn nasty. In exasperation and anger I set fire to the car saying ‘no one gets the car!’ We both lose: a lose:lose outcome.

Outcome four: ‘I’m completely honest about the car and we reach a reasonable price agreement. Both sides feel they have a good deal and walk away happy: a win:win!

Covey’s first insight is that we are encouraged by society to think in win: lose terms. If I can get one over on you I have succeeded. Think about this for a moment. In the short term I may seem to win, but in reality our relationship will suffer. Our community will suffer. You may tell your friends and then my reputation will suffer. Equally we all know what its like to be on the receiving end of a lose:win transaction. The other party has achieved what they wanted but we are left feeling used and undervalued.

Lose: lose scenarios may sound rare but they happen, very often when both sides are angry and frustrated. The phrase ‘cutting off your nose to spite your face’ sums up both the futility and destructiveness of a lose:lose scenario. That’s is what I fear we have now got ourselves into as a society over this Brexit issue. The divides are becoming so great it is heading for disaster. What we need is bridge builders who represent the result of the referendum – a narrow majority to leave the EU – but a substantial minority that saw the value of close co-operation with other nations for peace and prosperity.

Win:win thinking is incredibly positive and life affirming and is a good way of holding society together. If you want a divided acrimonious society vote for leaders who only think in win lose terms. If you want a more harmonious society appoint leaders who try to work for win:win outcomes. By their fruit you will know them.

Luke says that this parable was told to some Pharisees who ‘loved money’. The Bible tells us

‘For the **love** **of** **money** is a root **of** all kinds **of** evil. Some people, eager for **money**, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

It is the love of money that gets you into trouble. Money of course is vital and important. It literally makes the world go round. It can’t buy you happiness – but it does help. Without it we are stuck.

Proverbs 30.8 says

‘Two things I ask of you, Lord;  
    do not refuse me before I die:  
**8**keep falsehood and lies far from me;  
    give me neither poverty nor riches,  
    but give me only my daily bread.  
**9**Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you  
    and say, “Who is the Lord?”  
Or I may become poor and steal,  
    and so dishonour the name of my God.

One of the great challenges for discipleship is honouring God with your wealth in a relatively affluent country. Taking just reward for your labour but counting your blessings because you were born in a country with a stable prosperous economy. Taking responsibility for yourself and your family, making provisions for the future, but also playing your part in your community and your church.

Listen to this saying:

*‘I just don’t get the “not-paying tax” thing.*

*It’s just stupid and very short-sighted. You see people who are worth a billion and they’re still doing tax dodges, and you think how can you be bothered? These people who go to incredible lengths to dodge tax would be just as rich if they paid the tax – and would be living in a much nicer country. One where people were looked after, where crime was less, where housing was better and people were better educated. So, the money you’ve saved on tax, you’re probably having to use to pay for barbed wire around your property. It seems totally wrong-headed. Being able to afford your tax is such a privileged position. The people who can’t afford to pay their bills have got no possibility of dodging it.’*

Now ask: ‘Who do you think said that – and when?’ The answer is Graham Norton, in an interview to the Daily Mirror on 27 September 2018. Is he right? How does it relate to today’s Bible readings?

One of the other things we know about Pharisees is that they (unlike the Sadducees) believed in resurrection, so Abraham’s words at the end of the parable – suggesting that if the rich man’s relatives didn’t follow the teachings of Moses and the Prophets, then they wouldn’t even believe Lazarus if he rose from the dead – is quite pointed (and that is without adding in the possibility of an allusion to the story of the resurrection of another Lazarus in John’s Gospel).

What might be disturbing enough to shock people today out of their conspicuous and complacent consumption and encourage compassion for the poor?

The two readings are united in their call to live freely, to live for God amid many snares. They share a focus on how easily we ignore our opportunities to love and serve God in real and practical ways. Amos warns his audience about presuming that just because they are chosen, they can be complacent. Jesus requires the rich to be attentive to their responsibilities within the community and concern at divisions within society. May God help us to heed that advice and be good neighbours in our care for one another: locally, nationally and globally.

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