

The rich man and the poor man

by Sarah Ashton

Amos 6 v1a, 4 -7

Luke 16 v19 -31

Psalm 146

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be always acceptable in your sight O Lord. Amen

When John first asked me to deliver a sermon on these passages, I was quite excited as I studied Amos at A level and was always impressed by the strength and courage of a shepherd and dresser of sycamore figs, who, with God's power delivers a potent message. That message is that social justice is the true expression of piety. John then said that he wanted the theme to be the Gospel reading. The rich man and the poor man.

The Gospel reading is quite clear in its message. First we have the rich man who lives a life of luxury every day. He wears purple and fine linen, meaning that they were expensive clothes. Secondly we have a poor man who begs at his gate; his body is covered in sores and he is hungry. He would be grateful for the crumbs that drop from the rich man's table but he is ignored. The only attention he receives is from the dogs who lick his sores and, as I have said before, this is the ultimate humiliation as dogs were not loveable pets but unclean animals. What is unusual in this story is that the poor man is named. If Jesus is telling a parable it is the only parable in which he names a character, but we are not to confuse this Lazarus with the one Jesus raised from the dead.

When Lazarus dies the text says that he is taken to Abraham's side. The Talmud, which is the Jewish oral law, that is now written, says that paradise and Abraham's side are the home of the righteous. So it is a place of blessedness to which righteous souls go to await future vindication. Its bliss is the quality of blessedness reserved for people like Abraham. Abraham is regarded as the Father of Judaism who showed great faith and trust in God.

When the rich man dies we are told that he is buried (suggesting that Lazarus was not) and that he goes to Hades. In Jewish belief Hades is the place to which the wicked dead go to await the final judgement and as the rich man is in torment it is clear that Hades is not a comfortable place.

From Hades the rich man can see Lazarus at Abraham's side but the text says that the two places are separated by an impassable chasm. That must be adding to the rich man's torture. We are not told that the rich man lived a bad life

where he deliberately set out to take from and harm others, but, the snippet that we have suggests that he had a self centred and indulgent lifestyle where he did not consider others or share his wealth.

It is the rich man's wish that Abraham allow Lazarus to soothe his agony by dropping water on to his tongue, but Abraham's answer does not bring any comfort. He reminds the rich man that whilst alive he had everything he needed and more, whilst Lazarus had nothing and suffered. Now the tables are turned and, with the impassable chasm, it is too late to make changes.

For the first time the rich man now shows concern for others, he wants a messenger to go to his five brothers so that they might be spared. Abraham is quite clear that there have been many messengers throughout the history of Judaism who have warned people of what will happen if they do not act fairly, Amos being a good example: in earlier passages Amos said phrases like 'Seek the Lord and live', 'Hate evil, love good, maintain justice in the courts', he warns the people what will happen if they continue to turn away from God. In the passage we heard earlier Amos describes the lives of luxury that the rich had at the expense of the poor and says that the rich are not concerned for others and that they will be doomed. The warnings have been sent to the people on many occasions and like the rich man they have not been heeded.

The rich man then suggests that someone coming back from the dead would be a good way of getting people's attention and leading them to repentance. However Abraham says they have had many chances and taken no notice. This suggests that if a person's mind is closed and Scripture is rejected nothing will change them, not even a resurrection.

So what is the meaning of this story for us?

We are fortunate as we have the Gospels with Jesus' teaching on how to live. Jesus did die and rise from the dead, which the rich man thought would be a good way to get people to heed the message of God. The Gospel is not saying that it is wrong to have money but that it how we use the wealth that is important. It is our care and respect for others, as well as our faith, that makes us true followers of God.

There are some really wealthy people in the world who do have a philanthropic outlook on life. Maybe you have heard of George and Richard **Cadbury**, who came from a Quaker family. They believed in creating a prosperous, enterprising and inclusive community for their workers and their passion is still echoed in the work the **Foundation** does today. The work started when the brothers needed a

new factory and chose a site where there was room to expand and the workers would live in good conditions and there would be gardens and not industrial slums. Initially there were only 16 key worker houses then they bought another 120 acres and developed it on garden village ideals and a few years later more land was purchased and another 143 houses built. Bourneville, the village was established. This work went on to influence the creation of other garden villages and towns. Today the foundation supports groups like the Princes Trust, British Paralympics Association and Help for Heroes. The philanthropic aims of the Cadbury family are still thriving.

Only last week I visited Nuffield Place where William Morris, the bicycle repairer who went on to found the Morris motor company lived. Being me, my sermon was completed before I made this visit, and there I discovered that he was one of the greatest philanthropists this county has known. Lord Nuffield, as William Morris became, said 'The best thing you can do with money is give it away. Rich men don't give nearly enough money away....What can you do with it? You can only wear one suit at a time. You can only eat one meal at a time. You can lose even the pleasure of wishing for things. If you have so much money that you can buy anything that you want, you find you don't want anything.' Most of us have heard of the cars, many of us will have heard of Nuffield Science and Nuffield Health Care; there is also an Agricultural foundation. He really wanted to be a doctor, but his family didn't have the money for William to stay on at school, so when he became wealthy he endowed foundations that are still functioning. In his life time he gave away £30 million, equivalent to over £500million today.

We have all heard of Bill Gates, but do you know of the Giving Pledge that he and his wife have inaugurated? The Pledge is for the seriously wealthy to give away at least half of their fortune, either in their lifetime or on death to philanthropic causes. One man who has signed up to this is Tom Monaghan, who was raised in a Catholic orphanage and went on to found the Domino Pizza chain (which he has now sold). He has followed his faith throughout his life, but at one point he realised that he had more possessions than he could use. Why have more than one car? You can only be out in one at any one time. Why have more than one plane or helicopter? You can only be flying in one at any given moment. So he sold many of his 'extras' and gave the money to good causes. He even founded a university that runs on Catholic principles. For most of us the amounts of money that such people are talking about is beyond our imagination, but do we make the best use of what we have, not just for ourselves but in a wider context?

Our Gospel reading today is showing us that we need to be responsible with the resources and wealth at our disposal. We are only caretakers of these resources and they are only lent to us for our life time. How we use them is up to us. Jesus has taught us that we have a duty to care for all people; if we are well off financially and don't think about others and help them, we are not following the Christian way. If we have time to spare on our hands and don't give voluntary support where it is needed, we are not following the Christian way. Amos warned people about selfish lifestyles that exploit the poor and how that displeases God. I could embark on a second sermon here about responsible purchasing, ethical investments and environmental issues which could all be linked in to Amos' warning. But I am not going to; I am just going to say that the rich man in the Gospel reading was selfish and unaware of others' needs and he had his comeuppance when it was too late for him to do anything about it.

I pray that we may all be generous with what we have, be it time or money, and in our consideration of others and our world; may we realise how generous you have been to us Lord and share your gifts willingly with others. Amen