

Sermon: 14th October 2018

Readings: Amos 5.6-7,10-15; Hebrews 4.12-16; Mark 10.17-31

Thank you to everyone who brought food and other goods for the Archer Project last week and to everyone who contributes to the food bank. Unfortunately, there is a growing need for these sorts of initiatives and that need is likely to grow as universal credit is rolled out to the whole of the country. And the need is not always obvious. There will be people in this parish living in big houses, perhaps with nice cars on the drive who are struggling to make ends meet because of redundancy or other issues. Food banks seem to have become an integral part of life, even for people in work. But perhaps we need to ask why that should be. Why people cannot afford to make ends meet. To feed their children. To have to choose sometimes between eating and heating.

Questioning the status quo can be a dangerous thing to do. We have seen that this week with the disappearance of Jamal Khashoggi, a well-known journalist and critic of the Saudi government, who has not been seen since he entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. This year 43 journalists have been killed and since 1992 over 1300 have been targeted worldwide. In the era of fake news the work of journalists is even more important than ever and we need to support and protect all those who seek the truth.

In Old Testament times they didn't really have journalists as we would understand them but they did have prophets. People who were prepared to stand outside the mainstream and ask difficult questions. People who were prepared to speak truth to power. One of them was the prophet Amos who was called by God from shepherding his sheep and pruning sycamore trees to prophecy to God's people Israel. He lived at a time of military success and prosperity but he denounced Israel and its neighbours for their reliance on military might and for their shallow, meaningless piety. He also had harsh words for the way in which the elite exploited the poor, taxing them and taking bribes to fund lavish lifestyles. Amos's criticisms remain as relevant now as they were then. And today we might imagine him demanding why Facebook and Amazon do not pay more tax. Why there is a national housing shortage while in London thousands of investment properties remain empty.

Sometimes it seems that the church is obsessed with sex but actually the Bible and Jesus have much more to say about poverty and social justice, about our care for the widow, the orphan and the alien. Our reading from Hebrews reminds us that the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And it is in the area of economics that the Bible can really challenge us. All of us are rich by the standards of the world and how we use our money, how we are charitable, and how we work to transform the unjust structures of society are really important expressions of our Christian faith. It is in the area of our wallets that the word of God can really hit hard.

And today's Gospel is a good example of that. The man who came to Jesus had clearly led a blameless life. He had kept all the commandments. But there seemed to be something still missing. He was still searching for something. And Jesus saw straight to the heart of the matter. The man was weighed down by possessions. He needed to sell all he had and give the money to the poor and become one of Jesus' disciples. Now it may be that money and possessions were a particular issue for this man. Perhaps he was particularly acquisitive. Or a bit of a hoarder. We are told that he went away grieving because he had many possessions which were clearly important to him. But Jesus goes on to say that wealth was not just an issue for this particular man. It was and is an issue for all those who have money. 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the

kingdom of God!' he says. 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'

Over the years there have been lots of attempts to explain away this very vivid proverb. There is a gate in Jerusalem called the Needle Gate which is too narrow for a loaded camel to pass through. The Aramaic word *gamla* can be translated as either camel or a thick rope which would also be hard to thread through a needle. But whatever explanation you choose it looks as though Jesus is saying it is difficult if not impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

And that really astounds the disciples because in their day only the wealthy could really afford to fulfil all the requirements of the law. Only the wealthy could afford the temple taxes and the sacrifices. Only the wealthy could pay others to do jobs that would render them unclean. Later on, Peter is indignant with Jesus. 'Look, we have left everything and followed you,' he says. It seems that he and the disciples were expecting some sort of payback for following him. Perhaps they were hoping to get rich because in their eyes it was only the rich who could inherit the kingdom of heaven. If the rich could not find salvation then what hope was there for everyone else? What hope is there for us?

My former Diocese of Birmingham has been linked with the Anglican Church in Malawi for over fifty years. There are frequent exchanges and Birmingham provides financial and other support. Malawi is one of the poorest countries in Africa and the church has very little money. But the relationship has been very enriching because even though it is financially poor, the church in Malawi is spiritually very rich. They have deep sense of God's claim on their lives and their faithfulness is an example and an inspiration to many Christians in Birmingham. Without wanting to romanticise things, most people in Malawi have little choice but to rely on God. Their hands are empty so they find it easier to pray and to receive and they have a deep sense of God's faithfulness and love.

And perhaps their situation helps us to understand today's Gospel a little better. Having wealth makes life complicated in spiritual terms. There are lots of choices to be made. Ethical decisions to be wrestled with. Issues that the poor do not face, though they have many other things to deal with. But in principle, it is not the wealth itself that is the problem. It is the attitude that having wealth can create. If we have money we are used to having autonomy. Control. Being at the front of the queue. We can choose to live here or there. Buy this or that. We can buy a car, education, even health care. And that control can become a habit. We become used to getting our own way. Determining our own destiny. And we can sometimes bring that mind set to our faith. We can fall into the trap that we can influence the almighty. Buy our place in heaven.

Perhaps that young man thought that he could get into heaven if he made the right donation. Spoke to the right people. In the sixteenth century, the Reformation was partly a reaction against the idea that you could buy your way into heaven through purchasing indulgences and paying for masses for the dead. It is easy for rich people to fall into the trap of thinking they can influence the Almighty.

But our place in heaven depends entirely on grace. It is not something we can buy or earn. It is all about God and salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If we want to follow him we have to come empty handed, recognising that we are no better and no worse than any other. That like the rest of humanity we are made in God's image and beloved in his sight. This is not something we can do ourselves. If we want to enter the kingdom of heaven we have to surrender all control. All illusions of autonomy. And allow God to do his work in us. For mortals it is impossible. But not for God; for God all things are possible.

And this is the good news for us this morning. Nothing and no one is beyond his love and mercy. All are invited to his banquet and all may share in eternal life. Thanks be to God. Amen.