

**Sunday 25 September 2022**  
**Holy Trinity – Holy Communion (8.00am)**  
**Trinity 15**

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

**The problem of money**

Well, that was three especially challenging Bible readings this morning. At least, I hope you found them challenging because, if you didn't, then you either weren't listening, or are completely impervious to God's command that we should love our neighbour, or are already perfect.

Back in 1577 St. Teresa of Avila, a Spanish nun and theologian, wrote extensively on this very subject. She was a profoundly practical person and this is a very short extract from one of her works...

*"Our Lord asks but two things of us: love for him and for our neighbour... I think the most certain sign that we keep these two commandments is that we have a genuine love for others. We cannot know whether we love God although there may be strong reasons for thinking so, but there can be no doubt about whether we love our neighbour or no".*

This is very good and very hard advice. It is a pity that the rich man in today's Gospel reading never had a chance to meet Teresa, although the story suggests that it would have made no difference.

We are not told outright why the rich man deserved to go to hell. We are just left to infer that it is simply because his riches and wealth shielded him to the point where he could ignore Lazarus, starving to death at his gate.

This rich man has every excuse not to notice Lazarus. He has servants to run his errands, and he probably usually swept through his gates on a horse or in a carriage of some kind. His servants would know better than to allow Lazarus to bother their master.

The problem with riches is that it is hard to remember how dangerous they are. Insidiously, they get into our systems and make us dependent on them. Perhaps money should come with the same kind of Government health warning that cigarettes carry.

I wonder if it would be easier if we put all this into something of a more current context?

We have all seen him.

He lies on a pile of newspapers outside the shop doorway, covered with a rough blanket or even cardboard.

Perhaps he has a dog with him for safety.  
People walk past him, or even step over him.  
He occasionally rattles a few coins in a tin or cup, asking for more.  
He wasn't there when I was a boy, but he's there now, in all our towns and cities.

As I look on him, I hear voices.  
It's his own fault, they say.  
He's chosen it.  
There are agencies to help him.  
He should go and get a job.  
If we give him money he'll only go and spend it on drink or drugs.

So we all know Lazarus. He is our neighbour.  
Some of us may be rich, well dressed and well fed, and walk past him without even noticing: others of us may not be so rich, or so finely clothed and fed, but compared to Lazarus we're well off. He would be glad to change places with us, and we would be horrified to share his life even for a day.

What then should we make of all this?

Remember that Jesus was talking to the Pharisees, among others, and this was another of his parables which were told to give substance to his teaching. This was Jesus giving an example of how to give life to our prayer..."on earth as it is in heaven".

Our rich man is, in some respects, a good man. After all, he cares enough about his family to ask that they are warned about his fate. But the parable also warns about the unexamined life lived in the unexamined context. Our rich man was metaphorically blind. He failed to question the world in which he lived, and his place within it.

This parable also chides us all for that most simple of venial sins: overlooking. Lazarus was undoubtedly passed by each day by our rich man. He is simply part of the furniture; he barely merits a look, let alone comment. Jesus, of course, always looks much more deeply and intently at the world around. He invites us to notice people in the same way - mindfully, and with compassion.

Our rich man accepts the status quo.  
The parable has one thing to say about this: don't.  
Don't accept that a simple small gesture can't begin to change things.  
Don't accept, wearily, that you can't make a difference. You can.

I think that one of the deep ironies of this parable lies in the subtle way that Jesus inverts the economy of hope. Lazarus has nothing, but he never gives up hope: he yearns for change, for food - just for a break.  
But the rich man, although he has everything, seems to be hopeless.  
The punch-line of the parable is that heaven is the world turned upside down.

If you remember, our Gospel reading ended with a particularly dire warning as Abraham said to the rich man...

"If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

We have gifts to be used, not possessions to be guarded.  
We, all of us, need to make sure we are on the right side of that equation.

Amen.