

9.10.16

St Stephen's 11am

1 Tim 6:10
Amos 1a,4-7

“For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”

The prophet Amos condemns the rich and powerful of his day as the disparity between them grows ever wider. So he writes:

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion,
and for those who feel secure in Mount Samaria.
Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
And eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;
Who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
Who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
Therefore they shall be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

Now cast those words in terms of today, where the average citizen's wish list would be very similar.

Freedom from anxiety;
Security, stability and influence – celebrity status;
Quality furniture, leisure, and cosmopolitan lifestyle;
Wining and dining;
Entertainment and clubbing;
Expensive cosmetics and current fashion.

Lets take that a stage further as we look at society today. Since the recession, the wealthy are 64% better off, whilst the poor and 57% worse off, with increasing levels of debt.. It is clear now that the necessary steps which the government took to deal with the recession hit hardest at the poorer sections of society, as the use of food-banks has increased, and not least here in Guernsey; where the

demands on the food bank are constant; and the need by many to turn to the money lenders to keep the wolf from the door.

All this is reflected in the current economic climate which stresses the importance of free markets and competition. The result we see in the disparity between the earnings of the managers and directors and those they employ, reported to be 123 times greater.

Someone expressed all this as follows:

Blessed are the rich, for they inherited the earth some time ago, although the rest of you may buy shares in it so long as you can afford the broking charges.

Blessed are the powerful, but that goes without saying.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after money, for they shall be called enterprising.

Blessed are you when men envy and admire you, for then you will have become a member of the competitive economy.

As for the poor, the meek, the old, the sick and the persecuted, you will get your reward in heaven.

All this is a rather longwinded way of saying that our present interpretation of what a capitalist society should be is fundamentally flawed and needs to be revised. At present it is money which is the ruling theme, which rides roughshod over human needs and aspirations. We need to re-focus on a more rounded understanding of the theory.

Some years ago, Dorothy L. Sayers wrote on Christian morality, and said this: "Perhaps if the Church had had the courage to lay the emphasis where Christ laid it, we might not have come to the frame of mind in which it is assumed that the value of all work, and the value of people, is to be assessed in terms of economics."

It's not the possession of wealth which is at fault, rather it is how wealth is managed, along with power, and this seems to me to be the message of the parable of Dives and Lazarus.

The parable portrays in exaggerated detail the contrast between the rich man, unnamed by Jesus, and the poor man he named Lazarus – meaning ‘he whom God helps’. Nothing could be better for one, or worse for the other. The fact of the matter is that Dives (named in the 4th century by St Jerome) was blind to the needs of Lazarus at his door. Lazarus was outside – segregated from Dives so that he needn’t see his poverty. Contrast this today with the increasing number of gated communities, segregated from the rest of us, cocooned in their comfortable lifestyle, unseeing and often uncaring about the world beyond.

It’s this lack of awareness by many of the wealthy of the poverty and hardship faced by many in our society which is the fault, and which I suspect is the reason for the pro-brexit vote. It is the lack of understanding of how hard life can be for a great many working people on the one hand; and the profligate spending on over-priced consumer goods on the other, which simply adds to the abundance already enjoyed by the wealthy and relatively well off. I mean, to have one or two cars may be necessary, but a fleet of cars, or an armful of watches, three or more houses dotted about the world, roomfuls of designer clothes and shoes?

The story of John McGuinness is a case in point. He was a hospital orderly, and won £10m on the National Lottery. Before his win, he earned £150 a week; now he was able to afford whatever he wanted. He spend £1m on a house, and over £1m on cars; $\frac{3}{4}$ £m on jewellery for his girlfriend; $\frac{1}{2}$ £m on holidays; £1.3m to his local football club; but because of the interest he was earning, he still had £10m in the bank.

In spite of all this, John said that he was no happier. “It hasn’t brought me any contentment. I’m no happier since I won the lottery. The only time I rally got a buzz was the night I won. Then everything started to come down bit by bit. When I buy something new it does give me a 15 second buzz, but it’s a high that doesn’t last. A house is just a house and a car is just a heap of metal. At least when I was working I felt as though I was achieving something. I know that £10m

is a lot of money, but if I'd stayed as I was I'd be just as happy."

And in one area of John's life the win has made things actually worse. Although he's given money to his family it has only caused problems. "The money has caused so much hassle within the family. No matter how much you give them it's not enough A gulf has opened up."

Contrast that with the example of Sir John Laing of the famous construction firm. Throughout his life he'd been a careful and generous steward of the resources God gave to him. At the age of 30 his building firm was in difficulties, but he made a commitment which he later explained like this: "First, the centre of my life was to be God – God as seen in Jesus Christ. Secondly, I was going to enjoy life and help others enjoy it." To this end, in 1909 he drew up a financial plan to determine his present and future giving. If income is £2,000 per year, give £200, live on £500, save £1,300. If income is £4,000 per year, give £1,500, live on £500 and save £2,000. When Sir John's will was published, people were amazed to see that he'd left just £371. The man who had made millions had given it all away.

The question is, does money rule my life, or do I rule my use of money? Somebody put it like this:

Dug from the mountainside,
Washed in the glen,
Servant am I or the master of men;
Steal me, I curse you;
Earn me, I bless you;
Grasp me and hoard me – a fiend shall possess you;
Live for me, die for me, covet me take me -
Angel or devil, I am what you make me.

I suggest that we all need to take stock of our priorities and realise that the things of most worth are beyond price, and to remember that generosity is one of the marks of a Christian life. J. John put it like this:

Money can buy you a house, it can't buy a home.

It can buy insurance, but not security.
Entertainment, but not happiness.
Medicine, but not health.
A bed, but not sleep.
Companionship, but not friendship.
Money can buy sex, but I can't buy love.

Warren Buffett, the American investor, referring to the 400 on Forbes rich list, many of whom were at a fund-raising dinner, said: "The 400 of us pay a lower part of our income in taxes than our receptionists do, or our cleaning lady for that matter." Then he added: "If you're in the luckiest 1% of humanity, you owe it to the rest of humanity to think about the other 99%."

That's what the gospel is saying. Think about the other 99%. Open the gate and notice Lazarus. And then, to the best of your ability, do something about him.