

Readings for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

25th September 2022

First Reading: Jeremiah 32:1-3a,6-15

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him.

Jeremiah said, The word of the LORD came to me: Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, 'Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.' Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to me, 'Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.' Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD.

And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. Then I took the sealed deed of purchase containing the terms and conditions and the open copy, and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

Second Reading: 1 Timothy 6:6-19

There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it, but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a 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.

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen.

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches but rather on God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Gospel: St Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus in like manner evil things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

A Reflection for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

My apologies to the few of you who receive the newsletter by post and have already heard this first little story two weeks ago – before the Queen died and I changed what I was going to say for everyone else.

A few weeks ago, I listened to the story of the Indian journalist, Rajkumar Keswani, which was serialised on the radio. Some of you may have heard it too. Keswani predicted the Bhopal disaster in India, and tried to get those in authority to listen to his concerns, but without success. His attempted exposure of safety lapses and cover-ups of previous incidents met with the indifference of political interest and the power of corporate money. In December 1984, poor condition and maintenance of the chemical plant led to a major leak of toxic methyl isocyanate gas into the surrounding towns. It was the world’s worst industrial accident: thousands of people died and around half a million were injured. It was 24 years before the families of the victims received compensation.

Following on from last week’s Gospel where Jesus stated ‘You cannot serve God and wealth’, in this week’s reading from St Paul’s first letter to Timothy, we have the well-known saying ‘the love of money is at the root of all kinds of evil’ (and not ‘money is at the root of all evil’ as it is often misquoted). Love of money, putting financial gain ahead of other concerns, was certainly part of what led to the Bhopal disaster and the inordinate amount of time it took to pay compensation. Thankfully, such incidents are rare, and whilst Rajkumar Keswani may have been ignored

beforehand, at least some lessons were learned in the aftermath. But it does illustrate how love of money can blind us to the need to address other, major issues.

During the summer, many of the readings we had spoke about the correct attitudes we should have as Christians, and our attitude to money is part of that. What should this mean for us in this Season of Creation?

We live, comparatively, in a land of plenty, a consumerist society that attaches status not only to having certain goods and services but also to the brands. In the current economic crisis, we know that some people are having to make some very hard choices: 'eating or heating' is the phrase being used, and all of us are probably having to tighten our belts a little. However, we also know that there are many people in the world who are in a much worse position.

On average, developed countries, such as our own, over-consume the earth's resources, depleting them, damaging or destroying the environment and having a disproportionate impact on some of the poorest in the world. And in developed countries, this 'rat race' to consume leads some into debt, often leading in turn to mental health problems.

Some of you may have come across 'Earth Overshoot Day'. This is the day in the year when it is estimated humanity's demand for the resources of the Earth in that year starts to exceed what the Earth can regenerate in that same year. Fifty years ago, in 1972, Earth Overshoot Day was December 14th. Twenty-five years ago, in 1997, it was October 1st. This year, it is July 28th, and it has been around this date for most of the past five years. If everyone on Earth keeps living as we are now, we need one and three-quarter Planet Earth's to sustain us – and clearly we don't have more than one!

Interestingly, in 2020, for that one year, the estimate of Earth Overshoot Day shot back to August 22nd due to the pandemic lockdowns across the developed world that reduced consumption, particularly of fuel for transport. That was particularly drastic, and I am not advocating wholesale global lockdowns for a quarter of each year, but it does show that the situation is not irretrievable, that something can be done if there is a will.

Earth Overshoot Day is a global average, but it can also be calculated for individual countries – that is, what the Earth Overshoot Day would be if the entire world lived at the standard of that country. This year, the date for the UK is May 19th; for the USA it is March 13th. But there are approximately 50 countries in the world, including almost all of Africa, with no overshoot. I find it a very sobering thought, and something that should significantly concern us as Christians, that it is those countries and peoples who are partially offsetting our over-consumption.

Love of money, love of over-consumption, is the root of all evil said St Paul. But, in this reading from his letter to Timothy, he goes on to remind us that all riches are from God, that God richly provides us with everything to enjoy. This enjoyment comes with a requirement to be responsible and exercise restraint. As Paul says 'to do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share'. So, the challenge for each of us is to reflect on how we live in right relationship with God and all God's creation, recognising the interconnectedness between God, ourselves and all of creation and the need to live in harmony. The challenge is how we listen to the voice of God and, as our Season of Creation theme this year reminds, how we listen to the voice of creation. The challenge is how we learn to be content with less and to practise more sustainable and ethical living; how we contribute to containing and reversing the trends that lead to Earth Overshoot Day and also reduce the disparity between nations.

This is the way to the abundant life that God promises. At the end of today's reading from Timothy, Paul says that this is the way to store up 'the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that [we] may take hold of the life

that really is life'. It is in sharp contrast to the rich man in today's Gospel reading who received and enjoyed all the good things of this life but ignored the needs of those around him, living in a way that led to his ruin.

The environmental challenges facing the world may seem enormous, even insurmountable, but our faith gives us hope.

Jeremiah was prophesying at the time of the fall of Jerusalem and the beginning of the exile of the people of Judah in Babylon. Jeremiah himself was in captivity. It was the darkest of times and probably not a great time to be buying property. Yet Jeremiah, following the ancient laws, buys the land from his cousin Hanamel as next of kin to redeem it. At the heart of this law is the idea that no land is sold in perpetuity because all land belongs to God – rather different to today. But, more importantly, it is a sign of hope to Judah for the future: that after dispossession, destruction and exile, God promises that the people will return and rebuild, that there will be renewal.

So let us hold onto that hope as we go forward. However discouraging things may sometimes appear, we are not alone. We are called to do all that we can, which in reality is probably more than we are collectively managing at present, and to trust God for the rest.