

Readings for the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

13th October 2024

First Reading: Amos 5:6-7,10-15

Seek the Lord and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it. Ah, you who turn justice to wormwood and bring righteousness to the ground!

They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe and push aside the needy in the gate. Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time, for it is an evil time.

Seek good and not evil, that you may live, and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Second Reading: Hebrews 4:12-16

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 before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Gospel: St Mark 10:17-31

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be

saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

A Reflection for the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

From today's passage from the letter to the Hebrews: '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.'

In an age when we value our privacy, even as many lay their lives, or a version of them, bare on social media, it is a sobering thought that God sees right into the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. It is particularly so when we come to the thorny issue of money, including the challenging teaching from Jesus in today's Gospel.

There is a lot written in the New Testament about money, including many of the parables, some of them quite difficult to understand in this day and age. And in Acts we read that, in the earliest days of the church, material wealth was held in common, with no-one having private ownership, and distributed to each according to need. Most people who joined the church in those early days were not wealthy, they came from the lower socio-economic groups, so this was not so much about wealth redistribution as about caring for one another and attending to need.

In today's Gospel, we hear the story that is usually referred to as that of the rich young man, or ruler. Here, described simply as 'a man', Matthew tells us he was young, and Luke tells us that he was a ruler, a man of influence. He was enthusiastic; he not only knew God's Law but was committed to living by God's commandments, and he still wanted to do more. Why did he approach Jesus? Perhaps, like many, he saw in Jesus a sign of hope; he addressed him as 'Good Teacher'.

As that opening to Hebrews reminded us, Jesus saw into his heart, though not in judgment but in love. And he told him to sell what he owned and give the money to the poor, and to follow him, then he will have treasure in heaven. Jesus' message, here and throughout the Gospels, is clear: God remembers and is concerned for the poor even if the world tends to forget about or ignore them.

Giving to the poor has been the practice of the church throughout its history, but historians suggest that, in the early church and up to the late mediaeval period, there was more to it than simply material altruism. Yes, the Christians gave out of compassion and a sense of generosity, as did many other groups, but there was also a spiritual dimension, an expression of the hope that is at the heart of the Christian faith. Jesus had said that the Kingdom of God is near, and this was a practical demonstration of that Kingdom.

In the earliest days of the church, sharing of resources also helped unite the Christian community in a society that operated primarily on bonds of kinship: you looked after your own. In sharing and giving, Christians looked beyond their own kinship bonds to the needs of others. And, in the mediaeval period, giving to the poor was seen as a way of giving earthly wealth a heavenly value, literally of storing up that treasure in heaven.

Some of these ideas sit rather uncomfortably with us now. Linking what we do with our money to religious hope seems questionable, it is suggestive of trying to buy one's way into heaven. At the Reformation, one of Martin Luther's main complaints against the church was the sale of indulgences: the practice of giving money to priests, or churches, or monasteries, usually for the saying of masses, in the belief that this would speed the journey of the donor or a loved one into heaven when they died. And Luther was right in many ways, parts of the church were corrupt. But to ignore the spiritual dimension is to disregard the link that Jesus makes here and elsewhere: sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, he says, and you will have treasure in heaven.

This was Jesus' message to the young man, given in love. Surely Jesus wouldn't ask us to sell everything, would he?

It's easy to make excuses, of course: surely that's not the way society works now (and nor was it then). Oh, it would be a highly irresponsible and reckless thing to do. In the world today, we need the security that money gives us, or that we think it does. Do we?

This command to the young man does indeed seem to be something of a one-off in the Gospels. We don't find anything very similar elsewhere, although we do have the accounts of the disciples leaving everything behind to follow Jesus. But, before we heave too deep a sigh of relief, this story illustrates an important underlying principle about attachment and trust that we need to bear in mind. Here, the rich young man's attachment is to material wealth, but attachment could equally be to something else, power or status perhaps – something we may not even be aware of. And it is not just the rich and powerful who can be inappropriately attached to things. The Beatitudes tell us that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to the poor in spirit. The materially poor are not poor in spirit if their desire is to acquire material wealth at all costs.

God calls us to live from a position of trust. Periodically, I meet people who have made huge steps of trust, to do what they believe God wants them to do, or to go where they believe God wants them to be, without knowing how their material needs will be met on the next stage of their journey. And I have had the privilege of meeting people who have been remarkably generous in sharing what they have, however little. To let go of attachments to material things has proved immensely freeing.

Jesus seemed to think that the rich young man would find it difficult to let go of his material wealth, (as it probably is for any of us). But Jesus also said that, with God, all things are possible. And Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is able to sympathise with us in our weaknesses. But that doesn't mean he won't challenge us!

We aren't told what happened to the young man in this story. He went away with plenty to think about, certainly. Did he return later? Was he part of the early church, that group who held all things in common? We don't know.

But we do know our own story thus far, and we have agency in how we respond to the things that happen in our lives and the decisions we make. We should ask ourselves what we place our trust in? What are we attached to that limits our response to others? Jesus' teaching, and the witness of the early church, reminds us that the gap between rich and poor is not just a social issue, it is also a spiritual one. God's Kingdom is not of this world and the

Gospel should always challenge us. It should remind us never to be complacent, to think afresh each time we are challenged about how we use the resources God has entrusted us with, knowing that God sees into our hearts, with love, and that God also makes all things possible.