

Pentecost 13
14/8/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Amos 5:6-15
Psalm 49
1 Timothy 6:17-19
Luke 12:13-21

‘So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God’

(Luke 12:21)

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Christiaan Mostert

[A] Introduction

Today’s reading from the Gospel confronts us with a touchy subject and some very hard-hitting words of Jesus: about wealth, about being rich in assets, like property, bank accounts, investments, superannuation and the like. All of us are challenged by this little episode in Jesus’ ministry.

One way to avoid being challenged is to persuade ourselves that we are not really wealthy; and perhaps most of us – perhaps all of us here – are not really wealthy, compared to the very wealthy, the super-rich. But compared to the poor who own no property, have no car, no job, no money in the bank, no superannuation, I suppose most of us would have to say that we are well-off. Whatever our financial situation, Jesus’ words from Luke 12 are likely to touch a raw nerve.

[B] Be on your guard against greed!

Jesus has been asked to intervene in a family dispute about the family property; he refuses to do so. Then he launches into his first disarming remark: ‘Be on you guard against greed of every kind! Your possessions don’t give you life!’ We’d probably all agree with this, but who would not like to have a little more (a lot more) than we do?

Regardless of our income and our assets, we are easily tempted to increase our wealth, our possessions, our bank balances, the earnings on our investments. We are easily drawn to promises of making quick money and schemes of ‘wealth-creation’. We are forever bombarded with messages that tell us we need this or that to be happy or that we deserve to treat ourselves to this new possession or that holiday of a life-time. It’s hard to resist these messages because at heart we are all acquisitive. We would all like to have more money so that we can live in a nicer house, or go on more holidays, buy more clothes or more things for our house or our hobbies.

If we were poor – really poor – it would be very understandable if we wanted more. We don’t blame people who live below the poverty line for wanting more! But what Jesus criticises in the little parable he tells – about a rich man who decides to build bigger barns to store his harvest of crops – is that he wants far more than he needs, that his desire to make money is insatiable and involves a disregard for God and the needs of others.

Let me also acknowledge that there are many people who are very well-off, perhaps extremely wealthy, who are correspondingly generous in their support of charitable causes and who in many ways help those who are poor and needy. Money in itself is morally neutral; intrinsically it’s neither good nor bad. How we come to have it and

how we spend it are certainly moral questions; and the morality of these can range all the way from morally exemplary to morally deplorable.

[C] The point of the parable

It's hard to escape the impression that Jesus regarded wealth, possessions and elite economic status in negative terms. That's certainly how Luke portrays him. But Jesus is far from alone in this. Amos's God rages against those who trample on the poor and tax them unjustly, and who 'push aside the needy in the gate.' (Amos 5:11-12) And in the 1st letter to Timothy the Christian community is urged not to set its hopes on riches but on God: to be 'rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.' (1 Tim 5:17f.)

Many Christians have felt called to a life of poverty, making their life-style and their income the very least of their concerns. We find that deeply admirable! But it's not so clear-cut for everyone; and we have to be careful to avoid easy moralising in this whole area of decision-making. Jesus himself seems to have had a somewhat differentiated view on this. He didn't avoid the company of wealthy people, though he – admittedly in Luke's version – declared 'the poor' blessed, for the kingdom of God was theirs! (6:20) But he also praised the action of a woman who poured expensive oil over his feet for showing great love and declared her many sins forgiven. (Lk 7:36-48)

The parable Jesus tells in Luke 12 is quite specific. The man in the story is not a simple farmer with a small plot of land who is fortunate enough to get a good crop. He is a rich man. He already has barns to store his harvest. But he wants to be able to store more, so that he can make more money from the sale of more produce. He wants a long life of taking things easy, eating, drinking, being merry. He is not satisfied!

The man is greedy! Enough is never enough! He is an example of the danger of wealth if it's pursued for its own sake, i.e. in order to make more wealth, or acquire more luxuries, or indulge oneself more. His focus is entirely on himself. He piles up treasure for himself and he is 'not rich toward God.'

[D] Not rich toward others and not rich toward God

It's reasonable to infer that the rich farmer is not only not rich in relation to God but also not rich in relation to other people. He is doubly poor. The Bible is unambiguous about the requirement to care for those who are poor and disadvantaged. The man in the parable is 'so focused on himself that he has forgotten both the God who caused the earth's bounty and the neighbour without access to that bounty.' (A. West, *Feasting / Word*, Yr C, Vol 3,312)

Greed is not having any regard to the needs or rights of others; it's wanting everything for ourselves. It's our natural condition, just as it is in the rest of the animal world! When you throw scraps of bread to seagulls or ducks, the dominant ones want everything for themselves. Parents, especially mothers, do share what they have with their young, their children, but we have to be taught to share; and some seem to find it a very hard lesson to learn. Others share very readily: for them it's a kind of 'second nature'. But it is a second nature; it's not our first, not our natural condition.

There is certainly plenty of scope for sharing: with people who live in real poverty, people who live in situations of war and violence, refugees and people who struggle to overcome multiple problems, often including addiction. Australians claim to believe in a fair go, to want an egalitarian society, but (according to Andrew Leigh, in an article called 'Is the growth of inequality inevitable?') inequality in Australia is rising. We've all heard about the growing number of people, especially young people, who can't see

themselves ever owning a house. Leigh contends that ‘since the mid 1970s, real earnings for the top tenth have risen by 59%, while for the bottom tenth they have risen by just 15%. Today, the three richest Australians have more wealth than the million poorest.’ (The Monthly, June 2014)

It goes against the whole tenor of Jesus’ teaching to think only of ourselves and to be blind to the needs of others. Not to be ‘rich toward others’, not to be generous in support of those who really struggle, is sharply at odds with our Christian faith and discipleship.

[E] Not rich toward God

And so is not being ‘rich toward God’! Here Jesus’ words are very explicit. To build up more and more wealth for ourselves risks being poor toward God. In the end we leave it all behind us, though we comfort ourselves by leaving it to our children, not all of whom actually need it!

What does being ‘rich toward God’ mean? The text does not explicitly answer this question. But Jesus elsewhere teaches his followers to strive for the kingdom (reign) of God and God’s righteousness before all else (Matt 6:33). It is to centre our lives on God, God’s goodness, God’s extraordinary love and faithfulness, God’s on-going work in the world to enlarge and deepen our humanity, our generosity, our altruism, our compassion. It is the very opposite of making ourselves the centre of the world, the chief concern of our lives. To make ourselves the centre of the world – our own interests, our wealth, our possessions, our comfort – is to fall into the trap of idolatry, which has been the abiding temptation for humankind. It is, if you like, the great failure to be rich toward God.

So where is the centre of our lives? What do we most want in our lives, and why? What do we live for? What do we work for? Is it really just our own wellbeing and wealth – including, of course, that of our family and close friends? Or do we, in some significant way, embrace in our deepest concerns the plight and needs of multitudes of others? And can we encompass them and ourselves in a rich love for God that redirects and reorients all our values and priorities?

[F] Conclusion

Nearly 400 years ago (in 1648) at Westminster (London) a Catechism was drawn up and passed which began with what has become a well-known question: ‘What is the chief end of man?’, perhaps better expressed as ‘what is the over-riding purpose of humankind?’ And the answer was: ‘to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.’ It’s a superb statement!

To store up treasure for ourselves – like the man in the parable – is to be poor toward God; it’s also, incidentally, ultimately futile. To reflect daily, weekly, on our over-riding purpose as human beings, as children of God – namely to glorify God and to enjoy God forever – that is the beginning of being rich toward God. It is the fitting response to the God who, in the gift of Jesus Christ, has been rich toward us.

Thanks be to God.
