

Wednesday in Trinity 13 Week, Year C

Luke 16.10-31

Nothing draws hot, contentious debate like money. Look at the to and fro during the election campaign. It's not about character. It's not about vision. It's not even about history. Boil it right down and it's about *money*. Even when the political parties aren't at one another's throats about budgets, policies and costing, the newspapers have a decent spread of stories that are either about money, based on money or framed by money; government spending, conspicuous consumption, embezzlement, fraud, record profits; all the while the lines between legitimate business and sharp practices are notoriously blurred. When does a gift become a bribe? When is it right to use other people's money to make some for yourself, and when is it wrong? And then there are old-fashioned crime stories involving robberies and burglaries and the numerous other obvious ways in which money is at the centre of simple, old-fashioned wrongdoing.

Last week we heard a parable on money. Today we have Jesus teaching about money and another parable in which money is both part of the story and also the point. There is no doubt that our readings today contain Jesus' strongest and most explicit warnings about the dangers of wealth, and experience suggests that neither the church nor the world has taken these stark warnings sufficiently to heart. Somewhere along the line, some serious repentance, and a renewed determination to hear and obey Jesus' clear teaching, seems entirely called for.

The key to it all is *faithfulness*. Money is not a possession, it's a trust: God entrusts property to his people. He expects it to be used to his glory and the welfare of his children, not for private glory. Money also points beyond itself to the true and lasting riches that await us in the life to come. What they may be we can hardly guess, but these true riches belong to us in a way that money certainly doesn't, if we learn faithfulness here and now.

That's why faithfulness is the key; because we can't serve two masters. In Jesus' day the situation was pretty much a small minority was fabulously wealthy and a large majority

were very poor. This situation was the exact opposite of God's standards. This situation is still being repeated today. I remember reading a few months back on the disparity of wealth in the UK; the divide between the incredibly rich and the vastly poor *is now greater* than it was in the Edwardian (the turn of the 20th century) period of history. But the disparity between wealth in Western countries and that in developing countries is also just as acute. But then as now, there were people who said that possessions were a sign of God's favour. In this case, it's the Pharisees who are the chief opposition to Jesus' teaching.

This is where Jesus' story about Lazarus and the unnamed rich man comes into play. It's like a lot of similar ancient stories; except, the rich man isn't allowed to go and warn his brothers. The sharp ending is intentional. This isn't a parable about riches and poverty (If that's all it was, then some could get away with saying that those in poverty should stay in poverty because they'll get a nice future in the afterlife). No. This parable is part of Jesus' rebuke to the Pharisees, but it also points to something deep that was occurring in Jesus' own work. He was putting into practice in the present world – our world – what was to happen in the future one. In other words, Jesus is living out a particular line of the Lord's Prayer, 'On earth as it is in heaven.' He is anticipating already, the life that is to come. He's bringing to completion the law and the prophets. If the Pharisees can't see that, then *even someone rising from the dead will bring them to their senses*.

The last sentence of the parable is like a great crashing chord containing many notes being played on our organ. It speaks of the whole hope of restoration and renewal. It speaks, just like the parable of the prodigal son, of those on the fringes being welcomed by Jesus. And it speaks, for Luke's readers from that day to this one, most powerfully of Jesus himself. Jesus was himself rejected, vilified, and ignored. The church today is just as rejected, vilified and ignored. But the constant thing here is that God, the living God, did not abandon his Son, will never abandon his people and will not forget the 'Lazari' of this world. This is quite simply the reality, God's reality that we live in and live out in our day to day. The law and the prophets came to fruit in Jesus. Something fresh and new is

happening and they're signposts to what God is doing through his son, Jesus, as he brings about the new day and the new world.

This is the God; this is his son Jesus to whom we are faithful.

And yet in the midst of this we have Jesus speak about divorce. At first glance it seems out of place in a chapter devoted to teaching about money. Yet it serves as an example of where faithfulness to another person, not just God, was being quietly setting aside. Only the strictest of Jewish teachers at this time supported the complete ban on divorce which is implied in Old Testament passages such as Malachi 2.14-16. How this is worked out today in today's pastoral practice is another question, needing the fuller teaching of Matthew 5.32 and 19.9 as well as Paul in I Corinthians 7 as well as great care and sensitivity. But the teaching point overall is this; if you can't be faithful to your husband or wife then how can you be faithful to God? One can't 'pick and choose' which commandments to follow and those to set aside. So, Jesus is saying, it is the same with married life as it with wealth.

Putting the whole passage together, we find the underlying challenge is to be faithful: faithful in our use of money, faithful to God rather than money, faithful in our hearts not just in our outward appearances, faithful to the kingdom which has now begun with Jesus, faithful to our loved ones. As soon as we begin to think of money, or land, or even other people, as commodities to own or exploit, we take a step away from our vocation to be truly human beings, God's true children, and towards the 'other master' who is always ready to accept new servants.