

Our gospel reading today seems to cover 3 areas, our handling of wealth, judgement and the ways God can get his instructions to us. Today I want to focus on 2 of these. The first is to reflect on what they have to say about our relationship with wealth. The second is to do with how we hear what God is trying to say to us.

Relationship with wealth

Both our readings today talk about the problems that can come when people obtain wealth and give warnings. In some ways, we recognise the warning from our Gospel reading, the threat of hell, more readily than we do the one in Amos. We recognise the concept of Hell but to an Israelite in the time of Amos, the worst punishment they could imagine was to be sent into exile, out of the Promised Land.

But what was it that was being punished?

It wasn't that they were rich.

Being rich is not wrong in itself. Look back into the Old Testament and we see that many of the characters there were very rich, Abraham, David and in particular Solomon. The problem with being rich is the actions that go with it, either in the way it is gained or the way it is handled.

Great wealth is often obtained through the exploitation of others or through dishonesty. Our reading from Amos last week talked about the traders saying to themselves “we can overcharge, use false measures, and tamper with the scales to cheat our

customers. We can sell worthless wheat at a high price. We'll find a poor man who can't pay his debts, ... and we'll buy him as a slave” (8:5-6). The rich exploiting the poor and weak.

We still see this today when we look at big companies and the scandals that appear in our papers on a semi-regular basis, Sports Direct just this week. Companies that exploit their workers, in this country and abroad, in order to be able to pay their directors and investors large bonuses.

Great wealth can also lead to a meanness of spirit. That idea that “What's mine is mine”. This is much more what is being talked about in our passages. In both our readings today, the well off were ignoring the plight of those less well off. They were happy in their comfortable lives and it didn't matter what happened to the rest.

Again, this is not something that died out in biblical times. Rich people continue to live in wealthy comfort, shutting the rest of the world out behind high walls and guarded gates. We may not be considered rich by many in our society, but compared to a large number of others, we have so much. We have houses, food, friends. Your degree of wealth often just depends on who you compare yourself with. Are you rich if you compare yourself against a film star? Almost certainly not. What about if you compare yourself to a refugee who escaped from a war with just what they could carry?

What do we think when we walk down the high street and see a homeless person. Pity? Compassion? Or do we look the other way and walk past ignoring their troubles?

What about the refugees we see on television, fleeing war and abuse? Do we ignore their plight claiming that they're just economic migrants? Do we say "there's nothing I can do, leave it to the governments"? Or will we see a need and do what we can to meet that need? (Sue Gow)

However, money is not the only thing we can be rich in. We each have gifts that we have been given, are we willing to spend those for others? If we can understand computers are we willing to help others that struggle with them? If we can bake are we willing to bake for others? If we have time, are we willing to share that time with others? If we know the Saviour of the World, are we willing to share that knowledge with those around us that don't know Him?

This possibly is what Jesus most had in mind with this parable. Jesus told this parable while talking to the Pharisees, the wealthy religious leaders of Israel.

This parable was a warning to them that they had it wrong. Their understanding was that wealth was a sign of God's favour and poverty a sign of His judgement, but Jesus says that it was the poor man that went to heaven while the rich man went to hell. They saw the Jews as the privileged nation blessed in a relationship with the Living God and the Gentiles, any one else basically, as dogs, the lowest of the low, not fit even to share in the scraps from the table of their religion.

Listening to God

Reading around this in preparation for this sermon, I read that this story is very like a folk story around in Jesus' time talking about the reversal of fortunes after death. The twist in Jesus' telling of it is

the final line. In the usual story, the request to have someone go back to warn the sufferer's relatives is usually granted, but Jesus tells that it was refused. "If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone were to rise from death" (v31).

This brings me to the second area I would like to consider today, how would God have to talk to us to make us change what we were doing?

When I was licensed, I talked a bit about how God had spoken to me, once as a quiet prompting, "perhaps you ought to" and once in an unmistakable clear instruction. God talks to us in various ways, sometimes directly or through unmistakable signs, but in our passage today, Jesus says that one of the main ways that God talks to us is through the scriptures.

The Jewish scriptures are split into 3 parts, the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Writings. The Law of Moses contains what we now know as the Pentateuch, the first 5 books of the Old Testament. The Prophets are the history books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and those books we know as the Prophets, and the Writings contain the rest (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ruth etc).

Early references to the Jewish scriptures only refer to 2 sections, the books of Moses and the Prophets which either means that The Writings were not considered a full part of the scriptures, a bit like the Apocrypha in our bible, or that "The Prophets" was understood to include both the prophets and the writings, commentators seem unsure which it is. But, talking about "Moses and the Prophets" would be like talking about "The Old and New Testaments", it was shorthand for the whole bible.

Jesus says that there is enough instruction in the scriptures to tell the brothers of the rich man what they ought to be doing, caring for the poor and helpless, without a person rising from the dead to point them in the right direction.

Looking back, we know that Jesus' comments about someone rising from the dead were not just a unique way to finish the story. In John 11 we have the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. The Pharisees on hearing about this plotted to take Jesus' life (v53). In the next chapter we see that they also planned to kill Lazarus because people were believing in Jesus because of him. Just as Jesus had said, even someone coming back from the dead would not change their minds.

Jesus himself then rose from the dead and instead of taking note, the religious leaders tried to deny it had happened. They spent the following years trying to destroy those that followed him.

So, everything we need for guidance is in the scriptures, but it won't always jump out at us. We need to study our bible and allow God to point out to us things in there that he wants us to notice. This can be particularly hard if we have been reading the bible for years since we often come to a reading and think "I know what this says" and so we don't allow God to say something new through it.

When we read the bible we come to it with our own preconceptions, everyone does, whether they realise it or not, but sometimes we need to be open to God changing our views. This is why using bible reading notes or commentaries can help. Reading someone else's thoughts can trigger a fresh view of what the passage means.

So, in summary then, as we end, let's remember that God is concerned with how we manage what we have, both in what we do and what we don't do with it. And let's be prepared, as we read our bibles, for God to speak to us, and if he challenges us in anything then to act on what we have heard.

Amen