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## Disciples Seeking First God's Righteousness

Last Week Francis spoke on the passage from Luke about the shrewd manager and how we are to use 'dirty money' for making relationships for God's Kingdom purposes.

The three readings today continue on the theme about money, wealth and how we are to live in the world as disciples of Jesus - seeking first God's righteousness or as Paul puts it in his letter to Timothy - taking hold of the life that really is life.

I'd like to start with the gospel reading from Luke - the familiar story of the rich man and Lazarus. But to understand this passage as Jesus told it to his first hearers we really have to go into a bit of a different world. I hope I can take you into that ancient world of Biblical times. We have all grown up in western society, which has a world view, an underlying way of thinking, that has been shaped by Christianity since Constantine. It is what is sometimes called Christendom but perhaps in a symbolic way the death of Queen Elizabeth marks the end of this influence which has been waning since the Enlightenment. However much of the world still holds to the values of that Christian era. Human rights for example come out of Christian values but are cut off from their Christian roots and slowly today those rights are changing from the basic Christian values to whatever society wishes them to be. eg the right to not be called by the pronoun that matches your biological gender.

But in our basically Western worldview it is still assumed that people have some sort of "equal" value and that somehow we should all have some sort of right to have our basic needs met. This is very different from the sort of world that Jesus and Paul lived in. The radical differences between the common worldview of that time and now made the Christian message and especially the behaviour of Christians in the way they lived out that message in that world really stand out. Some examples; the Roman Emperors were praised for how many they killed and took prisoner in their conquests, Slavery was the basic way in which most people were 'employed' ie they were owned in order to work for their owners, women were generally regarded as the property of their male relatives or husbands, children were discarded regularly if not wanted or even sacrificed and poverty was the general state of the vast majority of people with destitution only an accident or sickness away.

In relation to today's readings, wealth was considered a birthright and a blessing to anyone who had it and those who were poor, sick or destitute were considered to be cursed, the lowest of society and of no value. Judaism stood out in it's insistence that at least the people of God and even those who lived among them were supposed to be treated as 'made in the image of God' with lives of value and some property rights and justice and mercy expected. However as the Amos passage illustrates, the prophets were often calling the people back to these principles as injustice was more the norm and the disadvantaged in society were not protected as they should have been.

And so Jesus, with God's heart for justice and mercy, is regularly both teaching about the plight of the poor, sick and destitute and also illustrating in his actions of healing, and connection with these outcasts of society what God's kingdom righteousness required.

In that world it was common to equate wealth with virtue. The rich man is clothed in royal purple reflecting their favoured position and with fine linen, a symbol of purity, assuming their righteousness. In the ancient world, concepts like wealth, virtue, and masculinity worked together and reinforced one another to solidify elite status. Wealth was generally regarded as a blessing from whatever gods you held to.

In our world of today the slippage away from a Christian worldview can be seen in our thinking too. Today people may also think that good people who work hard and live righteously can expect to be rewarded with means; likewise, people with means are seen as good (smart, hardworking, righteous) because they are able to acquire wealth. Just look at how many of the City Council candidates are described in their election literature. Meanwhile some people see the beggar on the street today and think 'It's his own fault, he's chosen it. There are agencies to help him. He should go and get a job. If we give him money he'll only spend it on drink. Stay away - he might be violent or abusive. ...and so on. I have an example of that from the church in Eindhoven. Toon lost his house and came with his car piled high to stay in the corner of the car park beside our church. After speaking with him there we told the church about him at the end of the service and suggested that some might like to reach out to him. The mainly European husbands immediately said those very things. Meanwhile a trickle of mainly Asian wives with more traditional Christian values reached out with cups of coffee and even a paper cup of flowers from the church arrangement. That really touched Toon who next week was in church pouring coffee, while still temporarily in the car in the car park.

The idea that the rich man is a good man is directly challenged by Jesus' parable. The rich man, who is not named here, overlooks Lazarus who sits with his sores at the rich man's gate. The fact that the poor man is named, and the rich man is not, is an interesting reversal. But the rich man and his actions are still the focal point of the story. Humanizing Lazarus with a name draws more attention to the inhumane way he is treated by the rich man.

The text does not say if the rich man's cruelty toward Lazarus is intentional or not; neither is particularly defensible. It was part of the role of the wealthy in Judaism to provide alms for the poor in their community. Even if it was largely self-serving, patronage was an expected means for some of the poor to be fed while the wealthy reinforced their status with virtuous action.

Often there was a bench outside homes where the poor could wait for assistance. A beggar who sat on this bench at the gate could expect some sort of attention, especially from a feasting host and guests. And, as verse 19 says, this particular rich man feasted every day, meaning Lazarus was denied many times as the rich man repeatedly ignored the call of the prophetic writings. Further, verse 21 makes clear that Lazarus is not asking for much. Scraps and leftovers from the sumptuous feasting would have made all the difference.

This reversal of the association of wealth and virtue gets particularly vivid in verse 23, as the parable states directly that the rich man has gone to Hades after his death. This is contrasted with Lazarus, who had gone to be with Abraham. (Note that this passage makes no reference to the medieval ideas of heaven and hell that were thought up around this passage. Jesus has just used a common picture of the time about the afterlife to illustrate his point. He is not saying that is the way things happen. It is a bit like we might speak about the sun rising though we know that it actually is the earth turning.) The dynamics of power now come into focus. During Lazarus' lifetime, the rich man's power was absolute and unquestioned; he had authority. In exchange, he was supposed to play a role, which he did not fulfill. Now, his power is gone.

Even in this situation, however, the rich man tries to assert some authority. In verse 24, asking for relief from his suffering, he addresses Abraham as Father (which implies a close relationship with obligations). And then he tells Abraham what he wants him to do. He asks that Abraham send Lazarus, whom the rich man repeatedly neglected, to help.

Famously, the Rich Man never does get it. He understands the message about wealth and the poor, but he approaches Abraham as if Abraham were his peer. Lazarus remains an inferior who can be "sent" to comfort the Rich Man or to preach to his ancestors. The parable turns from the changed fortunes of the Rich Man and Lazarus to the question of people who do not get the point. Surely Moses and the prophets

supply enough reason to treat other people with dignity. If people still do not repent, even Lazarus' miraculous return will not convince them.

What Jesus is teaching here is that in God's kingdom relationship with God is for anyone including the disadvantaged person with the lowest status in society - it is not something that wealth or social status confers. And that those who are advantaged are to treat all, including those whom society might reject, with dignity and justice. The challenge is to all of us, as it was to the rich man's siblings, to seek God's kingdom justice in every interaction we have.

Paul's letter to Timothy also fleshes out how this works with respect to money and wealth. He does not say wealth in itself is bad but that it can stand in the way of our allegiance to God. The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil and for disciples a heartfelt profession of faith in God is incompatible with the longing for material abundance. The passage speaks of the call to be content with having our basic needs met and if we have more to be generous and ready to share and to do good works - this is a lot more active than just giving away our resources for the poor but implies that we use all our resources to further God's kingdom and his righteousness, his justice. This includes tithing, almsgiving and our own actions for justice, our own actions in treating all those who are disadvantaged with dignity. We are not called to use our spare wealth to solve the problem of poverty. We are called to be active in furthering God's Kingdom righteousness in our daily lives and actively use our resources for that too.

As Paul commends Timothy we are to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness, not trusting in what we have, or holding on to our advantages in life but taking hold of the life that really is life. This is giving our all to Jesus. Let's make that commitment now in song and prayer.