

23rd Sunday after Pentecost 27 October 2013

Joel 2: 23-32

Ps 65

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18: 15-30

May our hearts and minds unfold as we encounter the word of God.
Amen.

Today's reading from Luke's Gospel talks about wealth: always a touchy topic. And I suspect that it always has been and always will be. Not surprisingly then, both the Old and New Testaments have some things to say about wealth. We usually just hear these in isolated readings, such as today's gospel, so I thought that today I would do a bit of an overview of the themes that we find in the New Testament's treatment of wealth. From that overview we can then tease out what that might say to us today, living 2000 years later, in very different circumstances to those of the 1st and 2nd century in the countries encircling the Mediterranean.

Broadly speaking there are 4 overlapping themes that recur in the New Testament's treatment of wealth: firstly, wealth can be a stumbling block, a practical obstruction to discipleship, to living as followers of Christ. This theme pops up starkly in the well-known story of the man, or the ruler as Luke's Gospel would have it, who has kept all the commandments since his youth. Despite this piety and his obvious desire to live a godly life, he is unable to rise to the challenge of selling all that he has and following Jesus. (Mk 10:17-31, Mtt 19:16 ff, Lk 18:18-30). For him, this is just a step too far.

As we reflect on this particular theme, we see that wealth can consist of more than our physical possessions. It can also be our social capital – the position in society that is represented by all our obligations to others. And so the story about people refusing the invitation to the banquet because they have just got married, or just bought a field or five yoke of oxen, fits into this category too. (Lk 14:16ff). Here it was the busyness of their lives, the abundance, the wealth of their relationships and activities, which stood between them and the banquet offered by the generous host.

The second theme about wealth that runs through the New Testament focuses on our sense of who we are and what we rely on. Wealth not only risks distracting us from our relationship with God, it also tempts its owners to put their trust in it for their security and their identity, rather than in God. It becomes, therefore, a competing object of devotion, an idol standing in the

place of God. In Matthew's Gospel we find the stark statement: 'you cannot serve both God and wealth'.

Thirdly, wealth is a symptom of economic injustice. The outworking of this is that the New Testament frequently condemns those who fail to share their possessions with those in need. Luke's Gospel, for example, contains the cautionary tale of the rich man who lives sumptuously and ignores the poor man at his gate. When they both die it is the poor man who is carried away by the angels to be with Abraham and the rich man who suffers a torrid end.

On the other side of the coin, if you will forgive the pun, there is a fourth theme, closely linked with the third. This is the theme of wealth being used positively as a resource for human needs. Wealth is to be used to support the Christian community and it also carries another deep obligation: the obligation to support the needy. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus clearly tells us that to feed and clothe those in need is to feed and clothe Jesus himself, to visit those in prison is to visit Jesus himself.

I think it is important to note in all of this that wealth itself is not seen as intrinsically evil. It is a resource, without any inherent moral value. Nor do the biblical texts advocate a pure asceticism: poverty is not seen as the avenue to spiritual enlightenment. The material world is not being shunned – far from it. Poverty is not seen as desirable. The wealthy are to share with the poor so that everyone has enough, everyone can be fed, housed and clothed.

The strand running underneath all of these themes is that of discipleship, of the nature of our commitment to God. This is about the depth of our love for God and the extent to which we commit ourselves to God's desire for us and for others.

As a western, white middle-aged woman living mainly in Australia for the last five decades or so, I am conscious that I am enormously privileged in terms of wealth. Except for a few years as theological students we have always had more than we actually need. And I find that when the subject of wealth comes up in the readings for the day, or because of something in the media, I tend to feel an odd mixture of guilt and defensiveness. Guilt that I don't give more to those in need, but also defensive: 'we need to be saving for retirement' or whatever. The one thing I am not, is neutral about it.

I don't want to land my personal ethical dilemmas on you and I share this only because I know that I am not alone – this is a common state for us in our society. We know we are well off, that we live pretty comfortably in a peaceful and pretty part of the world. Here in the church we know that we are fortunate to be able

to worship freely and that we want to live good lives, committed to following Jesus.

What then should we do? How much do we give away? What is legitimate for us to keep for ourselves? What is enough, what is too much?

But perhaps these are the wrong questions. The right questions are the ones about that deeper strand: about our commitment to God. Our particular use of the wealth we have is an indicator of what matters to us. The fundamental question then is, what does really matter to us? This is the question sitting behind the text from Matthew's Gospel: 'Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break through and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' (Mtt 6: 20-21).

The closer our heart is to God, the more likely that our wealth will simply be a resource we use for our wellbeing and for the wellbeing of others; the more likely that it will simply be one of the resources we deploy to live as Christ calls us to live, along with all our other resources such as intellect, emotions, strength and time.

Somehow, on the whole, we seem to manage these other resources better than we manage material wealth. Possessions and money exercise a powerful hold in our society. But they are just part of the resources we have and should take their proper place with the others. Wealth sits there with power as one of the great distorters of human identity, aspiration and integrity. Knowing this, we need to be intentional in our approach, seeing our wealth as a gift from God and using it accordingly. John D. Rockefeller, who knew a thing or two about wealth said, 'The only question with wealth is, what do you do with it?' I would venture to suggest that there is also a question about where it came from – was it ethically acquired?

But Rockefeller's question encapsulates our themes: what are we doing with our wealth as individuals and as a Christian community? does our wealth distract us from God? Do we rely on it for our security and identity, rather than relying on our relationship with God? Is it symbolic of economic injustice in our world? Are we using it for the good of the wider community and to care for the needy? These questions are worthy of our consideration.

May our hearts be filled with the true wealth of knowing and loving God. Amen.

Sarah Macneil
October 2013