

Back when he was simply a Suffolk primary schoolboy my nephew brought his best friend from school, Tom, home for tea, much to the delight of my sister-in-law. He has friends: all is not lost! However, throughout the meal Tom was clearly very anxious, hardly touching his plate, spending so much effort trying to make sure he was doing the right thing that he could barely do anything. Finally my sister-in-law asked Tom if anything was wrong. An excruciating pause followed while Tom tried to work out what to say. Finally he found the words and blurted out “Are you rich?” My sister-in-law replied that of course she wasn’t, what made Tom think that? “My mum said I had to be on my best behaviour as I was going to tea with the rich people” came the reply.

Now, of course, despite her protestations, my sister-in-law *is* rich; even richer now than she was way back when her sons were bringing friends home for tea. My brother’s profession is that of counting other people’s money and thus he has an income that is exponentially bigger than that of say your average Church of England Rector. But ‘rich’ is always someone with more than we have, it is never us. ‘Rich’ is one of those states like ‘old’ or ‘fat’ or ‘boring’ that, unless there is no denying it, is never us, though as a society, of course, we worry far, far more about being old or overweight or uninteresting to our fellows than ever we do about being rich. In fact, we don’t worry at all, quite the opposite: most of us dream of being rich, hundreds of thousands of us buy a lottery ticket each week in the vain hope of becoming rich: even the communists approve: the late Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping, when starting the process of dismantling Maoist China famously declared ‘To be rich is glorious’ and we couldn’t agree more.

But if our Gospel this morning is anything to go by, we are seriously barking up the wrong tree. We are very happy and familiar with the notion that our faith means good news for the poor: what is much more difficult to swallow, and much less frequently proclaimed, is that our faith means bad news for the rich.

Jesus couldn’t be clearer:

*"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"*

then a few verses later

*'Woe to you rich, for you have received your reward'.*

One of the most terrifying moments in the whole Bible is to be found not in some Old Testament vengeance slaughterfest or a scary vision by a dyspeptic Daniel of many headed brass toothed beasts but in St Luke’s Gospel— Luke the gospel of the

Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, fluffy, inclusive, nice-guy Luke. Jesus tells the Parable of Lazarus and the rich man. In this parable the beggar Lazarus lies in abject poverty, sores licked by dogs, ignored by all, at the gates of a rich man, whose life is one long round of feasting and partying. Both die, Lazarus, borne off by the angels ends up comforted in Abraham's bosom, the rich man to eternal punishment. Chillingly, we are offered no other reason for their respective fates, than one was rich and the other poor.

*"Remember" Abraham says to the rich man "that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony."*

There are no qualifications allowed- not even ignorance- and no opportunity for retrospective repentance.

Jesus would not have got very far writing for the Daily Mail. 'Blessed are you who are poor' he says. Not 'Blessed are you worthy poor who beg in a non-aggressive way' or 'blessed are you who are poor and don't waste your money on cigarettes and booze' or 'blessed are you poor as long as you stay in your own country'. It's not 'woe to you rich who haven't used your wealth properly' or 'woe to you rich who haven't given enough to charity' just 'woe to you rich'.

The Gospel message is rarely finely nuanced, and on this particular point it's spelled out in no uncertain terms. Jesus is clear:

*"You cannot serve two masters; You cannot serve God and wealth."*

The inclusiveness of the Gospel- bringing in those who the world has rejected and marginalised- has its obverse, *exclusion*. Bringing 'good news to the poor' means bringing bad news for the rich. Success in this world means exclusion from the world to come, from the Kingdom of God, because the Kingdom of God really is the world turned upside down. The hungry are fed, but the rich are sent away empty, the poor and lowly are raised up but the mighty cast down.

So why, in terms of the Kingdom, is being rich so wrong? Perhaps it is because the way we run our world and have always run our world means that to be rich inescapably involves making someone else poor, to feed our own obesity means to take the food right out of the mouth of the hungry.

Of course, none of us sat here today invented economic exploitation but we *all* collude to keep it going, whether we mean to or not. While we continue to have a

world based on creating wealth by exploitation– and the latest and greatest manifestation of the creed of greed, global capitalism doesn't appear to be in danger of imminent collapse– while we continue to have such a world we are actively working *against* God's purposes.

When Jesus is famously asked whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the Romans his answer

*"give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."*

is a little more complicated than first appears. For centuries it has been used to excuse all kinds of greed and oppression. But listen again:

*"give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."*

There is the illusion and the delusion of wealth. For what, in the whole of creation does not belong to the Creator? What do we have that is not held in trust from God? And when do we not again and again abuse that trust? All wealth comes from God, all wealth belongs to God.

This is all grim and scary stuff, but there is a glimmer of hope.

*"How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." ... .. "In that case who can be saved?" Jesus gazed at them, "For men it is impossible, but not for God."*

Now this doesn't make wealth any more acceptable in the Kingdom of God; it doesn't make it any more ok for us, in the words of St John Chrysostom to commit the 'worst kind of wickedness, the inhumanity without rival'; for those who *have* to neglect those who *have not*. But it is a glimmer of hope.

There are always good works that can be done, the poor are always with us and while they are with us it is a scandal, an affront to Christ and a *real* abomination before God. Jesus calls upon us:

*'to give to all who beg from you'*

remembering, to quote St John Chrysostom once again, that ‘the poor have one plea: their want and their standing in need: to be a judge is one thing, to be an almsgiver another.’

There is no easy way out. The stark message of Lazarus and the rich man, the camel and the eye of the needle is something we can’t explain away and perhaps we shouldn’t. We have to keep the uncomfortable parts of the Gospel fixed in our gaze as well as the comforting ones. When the Gospel has lost the power to perturb and disturb us then we have ceased to really understand it.

The Biblical world is often similar to that of those formerly popular ‘Cautionary Tales’, (you know the sort of thing, boy who chews his finger nails ends up eaten by crocodiles) stories where children with bad habits meet appropriately sticky ends. The teaching is rarely finely cast; more often than not we are shown a stark picture of sheep and goats painted in huge strokes of black and white. There is rarely time in the Bible for subtlety: rather, points are made as forcefully as possible.

*Sell everything you own and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven*

This is, indeed, a hard teaching. But as with all Jesus’ teaching what is happening here is that we are being shown an exemplar, where we are to aim. We are being told ‘that is where you want to be’: get going. We are not expected to arrive instantly, but we are expected to be on the journey, we are expected to be travelling. We cannot let our arms opened wide in Christian charity be closed by our wealth, we cannot let our riches turn our hearts to stone.

Perhaps the teaching on riches is dramatic and uncompromising, perhaps it is exaggerated to hammer home a point. The Church does, after all, number many wealthy people among those we consider saints, those who have already entered the kingdom of Heaven. But the challenge is clear. “Who do you love most?” – Jesus ask us – “Which Master do you serve: your riches or me?”