

Proper 23, Trinity 18

Amos 5:6-7,10-15

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

I'd quite like to win the lottery. I'd buy a nice cottage with some land for growing fruit and vegetables, I'd make sure I could support it, I'd buy myself some nice vestments because, darlings, they are so lovely, and I think I'd give the rest away – some perhaps to Bonsall church so you could have a good time arguing about what to spend it on.

I wonder, are these wicked thoughts, in light of today's gospel? The rich man who was told he had to sell all his possessions must have been rather cheesed off: he was a good chap who did all the right things, so to be told by Jesus that more was required in order to inherit eternal life must have been a bit of a blow – too much to bear in fact.

It is easy to interpret this story as if riches and possessions are inherently bad. And given that I am not one of the world's wealthy people, it would be rather nice to point the finger at those who are, in a begrudging kind of way. But Jesus was not averse to extravagance – anointing, wine, - and the instruction to give to the poor is based on the assumption that we have something to give. So the more I reflect on this story, I think that it is wealth and possessions in themselves that are bad.

Jesus has instructed the man to give up riches and possessions because the man in the story **was** rich and **had** many possessions – they were things dear to him.

I think the point of the story is that to inherit eternal life we need to shed the things that are most dear to us, whatever they may be – and in this case it happened to be riches and possessions.

Think a moment about things that are dear to us. These might be hobbies that govern how we live our lives. Such as

- physical exercise, people who are addicted to running, or going to the gym.
- Or football mania.
- Or shopping.
- Any kind of addiction.
- It could even be church – e.g. insistence that only one form of service, or words, was the right one.

Think about such obsessions for a moment. It is easy to let them consume us, to allow them to take over ourselves, often with harmful effects on our families. These are things that we think we need, but are, in fact, things that keep us anchored at a certain stage of our development, at a certain stage of life.

Such attachments can even be to people. To parents – you know the story of the 40 year old unmarried man who takes his clothes to mammy to be washed. This is a kind of abuse – of each by the other. The attachment prevents the man from taking responsibility for himself, and equally is unhealthy for the mother – she finds it difficult to accept that her little boy has grown up, and difficult to move on from the role of suffocating mother.

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with these things – exercise, shopping, football, looking after your family – but it's easy to let them corrode us and govern our lives. And when this happens we limit ourselves. We stop looking outwards to others, and instead simply look inwards to the whatever-it-is-that we are allowing to control us.

In my case, attachments to

- books
- to being a musician
- and for part of my life when I was a member of a gym to exercise

These were badges of membership of clubs that I thought I wanted to belong to, and these 'clubs' and these attitudes limited me and adversely affected the relationships I had with those around me. For example,

- wasting money
- putting these things before the needs of family
- affecting holidays and so on.

So what I think Jesus is saying here is that we must liberate ourselves from these immoderate attachments – things that we might see as riches and possessions, but things that in fact tether us. Liberation is, after all, the Christian gospel. Freeing us from the ties that bind.

We hear that no-one can follow Jesus without renouncing family. This is not, I think, an instruction to fall out with family and never see them again, but is an instruction not to let family ties govern us and limit us – it is a command really to grow up, and not be dependent on any one else – to take responsibility for ourselves, and keep with us only the stuff that we need for the immediate future rather than things that once mattered but do so no longer.

If we don't, we limit ourselves.

We see this in medicine. All illness, the Buddhists say, and I think they are largely right, stems from one of three things: closed-mindedness, over attachments and hatred, and in a sense these are all idols that have to be renounced., all stemming from attachments. Attachments that can limit us because they prevent us from doing something. Such an in-turning, some say, is one of the reasons that some people might get cancer – the worrying 'cancer' personality type, or heart attacks – from stress brought on by worrying because things aren't going the way you think they should.

We need to let go of trying to control the future – we never can. We need to let go of hurts from the past – it is right and necessary to grieve, for grieving then frees us – but think of Miss Havisham as an example of someone who limits herself by not letting go of events from the past.

And have an open mind for the future. Spring clean your mind as some of you spring clean your houses (or used to). Fling out the rubbish. This can be hard work, and requires some digging down into the depths to see what is there, again as anyone knows who has any experience of counselling or psychotherapy. This is Jesus' message. And that it is also sound psychology comes as no surprise, since as Carl Jung pointed out over and over again, Jesus' message is spot-on accurate for psychological health.

And this really is the message of the OT lesson from Amos in which he tells us that the powerful and wealthy will be damned for using their riches for their own personal gain rather than to help the poor and needy. They will be damned because they will damn themselves by limiting themselves. And that is what will happen to us – our souls will shrivel up and we will have limited ourselves. We will not be free to make the most of our lives. We will damn ourselves.

The Archdeacon of Chesterfield recently gave me a definition of sin that I thought wonderful – sin is 'a life unlived' – that is, not living to our full capabilities. Sin is the opposite of freedom. Attachments limit our lives. They **insulate** us and **isolate** us from the possibilities of the present.

If we want to be liberated, to have eternal life, we must renounce the ties that limit and bind us. So then rather than use our gifts and skills for the maintenance of things that hinder our growth, we are free to point them outwards for the enrichment of creation.

Amen