

14 October 2012, Trinity 19

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Psalm 90:12-17.
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

I'd quite like to win the lottery. I'd buy somewhere to live, minimal maintenance required, I'd go places. I'd give some, maybe even most, of it away. I'd give some to the church so I could enjoy watching you squabble 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 that more was required in order to inherit eternal life must have been a bit of a blow.

If you read Amos, the whole book (and it's not very long), you see that he is utterly in-your-face, often offensive, never polite, always straight-talking. Certainly not a diplomat, and certainly not someone who tells people what they want to hear. Not Irish then. In the reading today he is sounding off at hypocrites who take backhanders, who trample on the rights of the poor. Sound familiar? Jesus too can be offensive, punchy, plainspeaking, but in today's Gospel he is rather more diplomatic than Amos. I wonder why? Maybe the clue is in the phrase 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him' – maybe he recognised that the wealthy young man he was speaking to had his heart in the right place and would respond better to gentleness. Maybe.

Anyhoo (as they say), Jesus too is on about rich and poor today. What did he mean by 'eye of a needle'? Some say the phrase should be taken literally and that rich people will not enter heaven under any circumstances. Others say that the 'eye of a needle' is a phrase used for a narrow passageway not wide enough to accommodate a man on a donkey with possessions in bags either side. And what do I think? I think people forget that there are such things as colourful phrases not to be taken literally. I think people forget that there is such a thing as a sense of humour. Is 'raining cats and dogs' to be taken literally? Is 'a herd of pigs flying past the window' to be taken literally. Is 'thick as pigshit' to be taken literally (better not use that one)? No.

It's easy to think that the message of today is that 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 the story, the more I think that it is NOT that wealth and possessions in themselves are bad., but rather about our attitude to them—the way in which we let wealth and possessions govern what we think and what we do. Jesus advises the young man to give up riches and possessions because they were things *dear* to him. 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 they 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 it.
- letting a hobby take over our lives.
- football mania.
- shopping.
- booze, other drugs.
- attitudes: some people seem addicted to snobbery, or inverse snobbery.
- It could even be church – e.g. insistence that only one form of service, or words, was the right one.

Think about obsessions. They consume us, they take over ourselves, often with harmful effects on our families. They are things that we think we need, but are, in fact, things that keep us stuck at a certain stage of our development. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with these things – exercise, shopping, hobbies, 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. We let tunnel vision blind us to the world around us.

Such attachments can even be to people. To parents – the 40 year old 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 mammy – she finds it difficult to move on from the role of smothering mother. Jesus also says in today's Gospel that we must renounce family. This is not 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, 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.

We see this in medicine. Illness, the Buddhists say, and I think they are 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. These hatreds and attachments, some say, result in cancer and heart attacks – from stress brought on by worrying because things aren't going the way you think they should.

You may ask, what has this got to do with *eternal life*? Everything. AND THAT IS WHAT THE GOSPEL READINGS IS ABOUT. Eternal life is not about what happens after we die. It's about quality of life here and now, living life to the full. It's about being free of attachments, of the things that limit us, that bind us, so that we have full, wide, 360° vision of the world around us. It is a great sin for us to choose to limit ourselves by anything and so not live 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. Sin is life un-lived.

Eternal, ex-ternal, ec-stasis, out of time, in the present

If we want to be liberated, to have eternal life, we must renounce the ties that limit and bind us to the past. We need to live in the present moment. Today's Gospel is not about condemning riches, or exalting the poor. It's about letting go of things that limit us. Renunciation. Detachment. Mindfulness—that is, being aware of the present.