

**Second Sunday before Lent 2017**

**Proverbs 8: 1, 22 - 31; Luke 12: 16 – 31**

The message of this evening's Gospel reading is pretty straight forward: prioritise spiritual matters over material matters; put your trust in God rather than material wealth. And of course nobody is going to argue against that. It's got to be right. Not only are they the words of Jesus himself but the world's greatest cliché "Money can't buy you happiness" has only become the world's greatest cliché because it's just so plainly and evidently true.

But for all that, some caution needs to be exercised. If we're not careful, we can read this as an example of religion operating to fob people off with facile optimism. It's all too easy for people who live in centrally heated houses, with three square meals a day and all the benefits of a National Health Service to nod our heads piously and think that of course we should be thinking about holier things than food and clothing.

But the point is that there's not one of us who doesn't know where the next meal is coming from, or who doesn't have a wardrobe full of clothes or who couldn't be rushed straight into hospital if medical mishap befell us. Try telling someone who hasn't got access to clean drinking water, or a rough sleeper, or someone on a benefits sanction that they should consider the ravens or the lilies and the response you get might not be a pious nod of the head.

The desperate need of people without shelter or food or access to medical care right across the world, and in our own community, should not be underestimated or glossed over. Nor should we be so eager to spiritualise our concerns that the priority of claims on our consciences for justice is overlooked. If our faith is worth anything, if it is to be more than pious platitudes, we need to be concerned to see justice; we need to be challenging poverty; and we need to be modelling a way of living where there is a fair share for all.

But actually, this reading from Luke's Gospel does not allow us to fob people off with facile optimism. It does not allow us to substitute piety for justice. Rather, this reading encourages us to understand that people need not be defined by their material circumstances. It encourages us to understand that human dignity transcends poverty and hunger; and can be asserted by claiming the love that God has for everybody no matter who they are, where they live or what they have. Storing up treasures doesn't impress God.

And this radical assertion of the dignity of all gives hope. And hope is different to optimism. Optimism convinces us that if we just hang around long enough, things will get better. Hope inspires us to make things better. The reading doesn't encourage us to say prayers and things will get better. It encourages us to strive for the kingdom.

Poverty exists because people are denied their dignity and are treated as expendable. If people cannot wield

sufficient economic clout, they are considered not to be deserving of a share of the world's pickings. The only people considered to be deserving are those who have the nous to accumulate treasures. But this reading makes it clear that God's plan is for everything to be glorious. And that plan is thwarted when the rich can only get richer at the expense of the poor getting poorer. It is thwarted when treasure can only be accumulated through avarice and greed which tramples over others and consigns them to grinding squalor and poverty.

An attention to the claims that God has on our lives re-orientates us. We attend to God by contemplating our interior life. It is through prayer, it is through worship, it is through committing time to scripture and committing time to building up our common life as a worshipping community that that we grow closer to him. And it is through growing closer to him that we gain strength from him. And it is through that strength that we can let go of our own anxieties. And it

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is by letting go of our anxieties that we become less concerned to clamber to the top, less concerned to protect ourselves, and more ready to share. And the more we share, the more just society becomes and the fewer people there are to fob off with pious optimism.

Amen.