

Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity 2017

Proverbs 3: 1 -18; Mark 10: 19 – 31

I don't know if you've heard of the prosperity gospel. It's a phenomenon in the United States. Televangelists and the big churches from which they operate preach that God helps those who help themselves and blesses those who believe hard enough with material wealth. Being a true Christian is a way to become wealthy; and if you're not wealthy it's because you're not good enough a Christian.

I bought a book entitled Jesus and Money. I bought it because it was by a respected Old Testament Biblical Studies scholar¹. I thought it was going to be a theological critique of economic mechanisms. What I found was that the book was devoted to refuting this prosperity gospel. I found it amazing that a serious Biblical Studies scholar should find it necessary even to write such a book. But prosperity gospel is so

prevalent in the U.S. that it was necessary to put pen to paper and point out that the far more consistent witness of the Bible towards wealth is to be found in readings like this evening's New Testament lesson which gives rich folk a hard time: "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter into the kingdom of God."

It seems clear that God has a bias towards the poor. In Luke's Gospel Jesus says "Blessed are the poor" – full stop; not "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*": it says that in Matthew's Gospel, but in Luke it simply says that the poor are blessed: people in material poverty are special to God.

This doesn't necessarily mean, of course, that wealth creation is a bad thing. Jonathan Sacks has written about how Old Testament scriptures promote an ethic

¹ Ben Witherington III [2010] SPCK

which flourishes in liberal free market capitalism². This may, though, be a matter for interfaith dialogue. Sacks was, of course, the Chief Rabbi and he reads what we call the Old Testament from a Jewish perspective. We need always to be careful about making generalisations about the distinctiveness of a particular cultural or ethnic background. We need to be especially careful when the culture or ethnic background in question is Jewishness because of the awful history of antisemitism. There is a completely unacceptable anti-Semitic caricature associating Jewishness with avarice and greed which must not be perpetuated.

So let me make it clear that I am not accusing Jewish people of being greedy and avaricious. I'm simply pointing out that the former Chief Rabbi himself celebrates an affinity between Jewishness and wealth creation. And this has been commented on in reasonable discourse elsewhere. In his magisterial

² Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* [2002] Continuum

biography of Margaret Thatcher³ Hugo Young devotes considerable attention to the rapport Thatcher had with the Jewish business community rather than austere Methodism of her forebears. And indeed, this summer Robert Philpot has published a book entitled “Margaret Thatcher: the Honorary Jew” with the subtitle “How Britain’s Jews Helped Shape the Iron Lady and Her Beliefs.” Hugo Young puts it down to both Jewishness and Thatcherism having a lack of the material guilt that infects Christianity – or at least English Christianity if not, apparently, American Christianity.

It is good for a Christian reading of scripture to be informed by how it's read by those with whom we share a scriptural heritage, our cousins in faith, if you like. And I suppose all this is leading us to is saying that the Bible doesn't necessarily say that being rich is a bad thing; and we shouldn't automatically read Mark chapter 10 as if it says that it is. But what Mark

³ Young, *One of Us* [1989] MacMillan

chapter 10 most certainly does say is that rich people need to be mightily careful. Prosperity isn't a reward for faith. Rather, it is a test of it. The test is not to be distracted by wealth and come to idolise that instead of worshipping God. And the irony is that if you think wealth is the reward for faith, as the televangelists preach, that is precisely what you're doing.

Our Old Testament reading from the Book of Proverbs guides us through this test. Proverbs is, itself, of course all about getting ahead. There are similar, if not at times identical versions of much of what's in Proverbs from all over the Ancient Near East. They're manuals for young people about how to fit in and prosper at court. The difference between the other versions and the version we have in the Bible is that the Bible gives it a spiritual dimension by making all the advice subservient to observing the cult of Yahweh. What matters is maintaining the faith and keeping God's commandments. And so we're offered these two dualisms: trust in the Lord/do not rely on your own

insight; and do not be wise in your own sight/fear the Lord and turn away from evil. It's putting God first and making everything else we have subservient to that that makes the difference.

Jesus said to the man who knelt before him that he should sell everything he had and give the proceeds to the poor. It's not practical to take that literally. But if we look on what we put on the plate and offer up at the altar as being a token of our whole selves, everything we have and our very being, then we're getting what we are blessed with into a healthy spiritual perspective.

Living the life of faith is best summarised by those memorable words from the prophet Micah which sum it all up in three simple instructions: do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with the Lord your God. If only we could all live up to that.

Amen.