

Twelfth Sunday after Trinity 2017 Evensong
2 Kings 6: 24 & 25; 7: 3 – end; Acts 18: 1 – 16

I wonder what the moral is that's to be drawn from this evening's Old Testament lesson: perhaps it's about the danger of the unfettered operation of market forces! I'm sure the family of the gate keeper, who was trampled to death in the stampede to get to the glut of goods that were cheap because they were in plentiful supply, would say so! Poor chap, trampled to death because people were beside themselves in order to get a bargain.

We don't often complain when market forces are driving prices down. It's usually the other way round, when the scarcity of a product is forcing prices up quite out of the reach of ordinary people. I've never actually heard anyone complain about having to pay inflated prices for dove's dung – in fact I'm quite surprised to learn that there is even a market for dove's dung; I'm sure there isn't in Bridlington; there

certainly isn't for seagull droppings; but if anyone wants to pay me five shekels for one-fourth of a kab of what's splattered down the side of my car, I'll gladly relieve them of it.

What we do know about, of course, is the lack of affordable housing. Demand outstrips the supply of housing, the prices go up, and people at the bottom of the housing market simply cannot afford to buy – and perhaps a whole generation of people are simply going to be forced out of the housing market by the inflation of prices. So we rightly complain when the prices of things are forced up by market forces, but we don't so often complain when they are forced down.

But perhaps we should. There are at least two different ways in which cheap goods create ethical issues to which there are spiritual implications. In actual fact we do see precisely the phenomenon we read about this evening in 2 Kings chapter 7. This importation from the States of Black Friday on the last

Friday in November is reducing people to a state of atavism. We haven't had any supermarket doorkeepers trampled to death, admittedly, but do you remember seeing those unedifying scenes of people brawling over flat screen TVs? Of course, we all appreciate a good bargain. And there's both a degree of innocent pleasure, as well as hard-nosed prudence in getting a bargain. But what Black Friday induces is a demeaning form of gluttony. And that is a spiritual matter.

It is, though, perhaps only the foolhardy preacher who chooses to speak about it from the pulpit. There is, of course, the simple fact that it's difficult to do so without a degree of hypocrisy. Who, in 2017, with all the pressures of consumerism with which we are faced, could honestly claim not ever to surrender to gluttony? Well, maybe some people would think the word gluttony a bit harsh, but certainly I suspect we all indulge ourselves rather gratuitously from time to time.

But, with all those caveats aside, it is a fact that we see gluttony around us and are assailed by it. And furthermore we need spiritual strength to be protected from it. And that's because it demeans us. It leads us to the sort of lack of respect for others we see on Black Friday; and it leads us to a form of idolatry when our craving for consuming stuff takes priority over all else, including justice and more importantly the place of God in our lives.

Of course the other example of when low prices are unethical is when prices are deflated by the over-supply of labour. Wages are forced down the point that workers are exploited and don't receive a fair wage. And I guess most of us know that the only reason we can buy three-packs of t-shirts for £10 or whatever, is because people have worked in sweat shops and not received a fair wage. And this means that our consumer power is a tool of our discipleship.

We cannot claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ unless we honour God; and we cannot honour God unless we honour the image of God in which each human is made. So whenever we are complicit in the exploitation of others, we are dishonouring God and betraying our discipleship.

And this is when discipleship really comes to mean something, in the minutiae, the nitty-gritty of its application. I could ask what price discipleship if we're not prepared to pay an extra 23p on a 4-pint flagon of milk to ensure a fair price for the dairy farmers. I could ask that. But I'm not going to, because I know that I usually buy milk from Aldi. So it all comes rather too close to home.

We cannot opt out of living in the society we find ourselves in. So there is no point wringing our hands and pretending and pretending to be aloof from consumerism, and there's no point in beating ourselves up because we are inextricably bound up in

it and complicit with it. But it is right that we should continually be prepared to wrestle with the challenges it creates.

Amen.