

starters for Sunday

19th Sunday after Pentecost

29 September 2013

Rev John Harvey, retired interim minister, offers his thoughts on this week's lectionary.

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This Sunday, my suggestion is that the starting point today is the Gospel passage.

[St Luke 16: 19 – 31](#)

The suggestion in one commentary that this parable is possibly based on a well-known folk-story of the time rings true – and you can imagine how many of the first hearers of Jesus' telling of it would relish the way in which the rich man got his come-uppance!

Of course the reason why Luke places it here, at the end of this chapter which is all about the sort of ethical behaviour that God expects of us in society, is much more serious.

For the warning that Jesus is issuing – primarily to the Pharisees of his day, but also to us – is simply this: what God expects of us has been clear for a very long time, and if we will not pay attention to that, then even an event as powerful as the resurrection is unlikely to make any difference.

We will consider the implications of this for our time in a moment; for now, it would be good to look at one of the other passages in today's lectionary, which Jesus may well have had in mind when he told the story.

[Amos 6: 1a, 4 – 7](#)

Amos, a shepherd, as he himself tells us at the start of his book, spoke powerfully to the people of his time (in the Kingdom of Israel around the middle of the 8th Century BC) just as a long and settled period of prosperity was coming to an end. I always think of Amos as the classic prophet of what has been called “the social gospel” - perhaps best summed up in the famous passage in the previous chapter, when he hears God saying to the self-satisfied religious practitioners of the time

“I can't stand your religious meetings.
I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions.
I want nothing to do with your religious projects,
your pretentious slogans and goals.



I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes,
 your public relations and image making.
 I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music.
 When was the last time you sang to ME?
 Do you know what I want?
 I want justice – oceans of it.
 I want fairness – rivers of it.
 That's what I want. That's ALL I want.”

(Petersen, *The Message*, Navpress edition, 2002, page 1256.)

In our passage for today, Amos then goes on to name and shame the people he has specifically in mind: the sybarites who spend their days eating and drinking; the self-indulgent music makers: the ones who spend their money on good wine and expensive perfumes, and take no thought for the real state of the nation. It must have made for very uncomfortable listening to many of those who first heard it; and I think we can be reasonably certain that if there were any Pharisees in the crowd when Jesus told his story, all these centuries later, then they could hardly have failed to make the connection – the rich man in the story was precisely the one Amos had in mind.

What, then, of Luke's point at the end of his passage, when he has Abraham say to the rich man down there in Hades

“If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone were to rise from death”?

My sense is that Luke here is simply stating the obvious, both for his day, and for ours. We know, from the witness of his second volume, *The Acts of the Apostles*, that this is exactly what happened; the religious leaders remained completely unconvinced by the preaching of the resurrection by Peter and Paul and the others, precisely because, at least in part, they had long since stopped taking the preaching of Amos and the others seriously, and had instead retreated into a cocoon of self-indulgent self-righteousness, bolstered by exactly the religious practices which Amos had so roundly condemned in the first place.



What might this mean for us? Perhaps there are two messages here. On the one hand, for those of us who are religious, it is always necessary, is it not, to be wary of the temptation to turn religious practices into an end in themselves, and forget that what God really requires of us? In the words of that other great 8th Century prophet, Micah, is

“to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.” (Micah 6: 8b – Good News Version.)

Perhaps it is worth reflecting here on what Eugene Petersen writes in his introduction to the book of Amos, where he says

“More people are exploited and abused in the cause of religion than in any other way. Sex, money, and power all take a backseat to religion as a source of evil. Religion is the most dangerous energy source known to humankind. The moment a person (or government or religion or organization) is convinced that God is either ordering or sanctioning a cause or project, anything goes. The history, world-wide, of religion-fueled hate, killing, and oppression is staggering. The biblical prophets are in the front of those doing something about it.”

(Petersen, *ibid*, p.1248)

The other message, is to those who fall into the category of those named and shamed by Amos in our lectionary passage. Rampant hedonism and consumerism is alive and well today, certainly in the north and west of our world; and the sad words of Abraham to the rich man in Hades ring very true here also – if those who sell their souls to these idols will not listen to the truths that the prophets like Amos and Micah were proclaiming, then there's very little likelihood that they'll pay any heed to those who preach the resurrection of Jesus.

What, then, are we to do?

If we turn now to the passage from Jeremiah, my sense is that a very positive guidance begins to appear.



[Jeremiah 32: 1 – 3a, 6 – 15](#)

Jeremiah was a deeply humble and spiritual man, profoundly in love with, and completely identified with, his people and his nation, at a time, around the middle of the 7th Century BC, when huge and potentially catastrophic world events were shaking the very foundations of life as he knew it. In this passage, he sets the scene by telling us that the invading Babylonians were besieging Jerusalem, and he himself was a prisoner of the Jewish King Zedekiah, because he had had the temerity – and the courage, it must be said – to foretell, in public, that the Babylonians would win.

Then, as if that was not enough, in jail and with his world about to collapse all around him, and death or exile staring him and his people in the face, of all things he goes and buys a piece of real estate, in order to publicly proclaim his faith that one day God will bring his people back, and restore the land to them once again. As he puts it most movingly himself

“The Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, has said that houses, fields, and vineyards will again be bought in this land.”

(32: 15 – Good News Version)

As I read this amazing passage, the person from my time that comes to mind is the German Protestant theologian and church leader Dietrich Bonhoeffer. When war was about to break out in Europe in the summer of 1939, Bonhoeffer, by then a well-known and much respected theologian, was safely living in America, where he could easily have remained and lived out the war. In a letter to his fellow theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in July of that year, he wrote

“I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”

(Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom*, Collins, 1966, p.246, quoted in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Fontana Books, 1973, p.7)



In fact, of course, Bonhoeffer did not live to take part on that reconstruction; implicated in the 1944 July plot to assassinate Hitler, he was imprisoned and finally executed in April 1945, just a few weeks before the war ended. Just like Jeremiah, deeply humble and profoundly committed to his own nation and its ultimate good, Bonhoeffer both believed that God would, in the end, bring good and prosperity out of disaster and evil, and was willing to act on that belief in the face of apparent catastrophe, even at the risk of his own life.

Thankfully, it is very unlikely that we are going to find ourselves in such an extreme situation as either Jeremiah, or Bonhoeffer, in the foreseeable future. Yet is there not a principle for Christian action here? In the face of the rampant consumerism and hedonism of our times, and in a period when religious people may feel tempted to withdraw into the safety of fundamentalism of one sort or another, the example of these two giants of faith calls to us a different sort of action. They call us to stand boldly, and in public, for the values of Amos and Micah and Jesus; to struggle, with others, to seek to put these values into practice both in our own lives and in the life of our societies; to make injustice visible and to live in a counter-cultural way, in order to proclaim that the God of Jesus and Micah and Amos, the God of Jeremiah and Bonhoeffer, is the One whose reign will triumph in the end; to live out the values of that reign even in these dark and difficult times.

There is an Affirmation of Faith, written and spoken by Iona Community members after a peaceful demonstration against the Faslane Trident nuclear submarine base in February 2001, which seems to me to encapsulate this conviction:

“ We believe that God is present
in the darkness before dawn;
in the waiting and uncertainty
where fear and courage join hands,
conflict and caring link arms,
and the sun rises over barbed wire.
We believe in a with-us God
who sits down in our midst



to share our humanity.

We affirm a faith

that takes us beyond the safe place

into action, into vulnerability

and into the streets.

We commit ourselves to work for change

and put ourselves on the line:

to bear responsibility, take risks,

live powerfully and face humiliation;

to stand with those on the edge;

to choose life

and be used by the Spirit

for God's new community of hope.

Amen.” (*Iona Abbey Worship Book*, Wild Goose Publications, 2001, p.109)



[1 Timothy 6: 6 – 19](#)

The passage from the Epistles for today spells out for the early Christians, and for us, in some detail how to live the sort of the life that the prophets were calling for in their day; and contains the oft-quoted (and indeed often mis-quoted!) verse 10 - “For the love of money is a source of all kinds of evil”. If we were to read this passage out of context, my sense is that there could be a danger that we could fall into the temptation of thinking that we could, by our own efforts, live in this sort of way. Indeed this is a temptation that can at times beset Christian activists, who can, if we are not careful, begin to think that by our own strength of purpose and determination we can change the world and bring in the reign of God. The final words of this letter – like its opening words, like indeed the opening and closing words of almost all his letters – keeps us right. In praying that “God's grace” be with Timothy, and all who read the letter, Paul reminds them, and us, that we are dependent on a power and a gift which is both beyond ourselves and at the same time placed within. “Amazing grace”, indeed – which enables us to do it all – to “strive for righteousness”, to “run your best race”, to “obey your orders”, and of course in the last analysis, in the company of Amos and Micah and Jeremiah and Bonhoeffer and all the others, to give God, and God alone, “the honour and eternal dominion! Amen.”

[Psalm 91: 1-6, 14-16](#) and [Psalm 146](#)

The two Psalms in today's lectionary can be used in worship to supplement the theme. Timothy Dudley-Smith's lovely paraphrase of Psalm 91 is found as song number 55 in CH4 - “Safe in the shadow of the Lord, beneath his hand and power, I trust in him, I trust in him, my fortress and my tower.” Psalm 146, with its great warning “Do not put your trust in human leaders; no human being can save you”, is found as Song number 102, where it is laid out to be read antiphonally by the congregation.



Talk with the Children

A modern parable.

“There once were two boys who lived near each other, and went to the same school.

One boy – his name was Jimmy – was a very greedy boy indeed – he was always stuffing his face, and he never, ever, shared his playpiece with anyone else, even though his friends often told him that he might make himself ill.

The other boy – called Andrew – came from quite a poor family. He often looked enviously at the lovely things Jimmy brought along to school - cakes, and biscuits, and stuff – but Jimmy never, ever, offered any to him.

One day, Jimmy and Andrew were among a bunch of children who were invited to another boy's house, after school, to a birthday party.

So along they all went – and they had a great time – and for once, wee Andrew was able to enjoy some of the lovely food that was available – and of course Jimmy was meanwhile stuffing his face!

Then, after a while, Jimmy began to feel quite sick. He went to Andrew, and begged him to call a doctor, as he felt so ill. Andrew didn't want to leave the party – he was enjoying himself so much, now that he had all these lovely things to eat. So Jimmy was left groaning away in a corner, feeling more and more miserable. He said to Andrew; “I wish I hadn't been so greedy – why didn't someone tell me what might happen to me if I ate so much?” Andrew, of course, said to Jimmy: “Well, we did tell you, but you wouldn't listen!”

Jesus once told a story like this to his friends. Why do you think he told that story?

I think he told that story to help us to remember two very important things in life:

Number one: if you have lots of good things in life, do not be greedy and keep them to yourself – share them with people who maybe do not have as much as you.

And number two: if you do not share your good things, and then get into trouble, you will perhaps not find many people to help you out!”



Prayers

A Prayer of Approach

God, before time began,
God, after all time ends,
God, of the present moment,
we worship you.

Before our earliest memories
you knew us;
after all memories shall cease
you will know us still.

Out of reach
of the highest endeavours of science;
undefined
by the deepest workings of our brains,
yet to the humble heart,
the questing spirit,
the anguished soul,
the quiet mind,
you choose, in love and mercy,
to make yourself known.

Before such love,
such divinity,



what can we do
but wait in silence,
trusting in you
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God our lover,
look in mercy on our anxious lives.

Day by day
we struggle to achieve,
rarely stopping to ask
if our achievements match your will.

Day by day
we battle to communicate,
rarely remembering to check
if our communication is a channel
for your good news.

Day by day
we endeavour to control,
rarely pausing to ensure
that first we are controlled
by your Spirit.

Forgive the frantic fury
of our anxious lives;
speak to us



in the midst of the struggles
of daily living;
catch us now, we pray,
in a moment of silence,
as we wait, together, on you.

Gracious God,
your love brings
life to dead souls,
light to dark minds,
strength to weak wills.
Show us how to search for you
in the midst of life;
help us to believe and trust
that no wrong we have done,
and no good we have failed to do,
is too great for you to pardon,
through Jesus Christ your Son,
in whose words we now pray together,
and say:

Our Father...



Hymns

CH4 18	The earth belongs to God alone (Psalm 24)
CH4 36	God is our refuge and our strength (Psalm 46)
CH4 153	Great is thy faithfulness
CH4 246	Great God of every shining constellation
CH4 247	Moved by the Gospel, let us move
CH4 248	For my sake and the gospel's, go
CH4 405	We sing the praise of him who died
CH4 485	Dear Lord and Father of mankind
CH4 518	'Lift up your hearts!' We lift them, Lord, to thee
CH4 519	Love divine, all loves excelling
CH4 522	The Church is wherever God's people are praising
CH4 533	Will you come and follow me
CH4 537	We do not hope to ease our minds
CH4 544	When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?



Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission



www.resourcingmission.org.uk is host to Starters for Sunday as well as key mission resources from the Church of Scotland, for download and purchase, and has an online booking facility for Mission & Discipleship events (eg National Youth Assembly). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. We welcome all feedback so if there is something you'd like

to see on this new site that isn't already there, please use the 'Website Feedback' option on the ['Contact Us'](#) page.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in Prayers. You may also be interested in looking at our publication **Pray Now 2013**. Please click [here](#).



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music magazine **Different Voices** which can be found on our Resourcing Mission website [here](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for **what** you might preach this Sunday. If you would be interested in looking at our free materials on **how** you might preach, please click [here](#) to see our

[Preachers Perspectives](#) web page where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.



Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots i the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) If you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism you may find some helpful materials here

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to Rev John Harvey for providing us with this Sunday's material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

