

Strong Medicine for the Wealthy

a sermon preached on the

18th Sunday after Pentecost

30 September 2007

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lections: Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Luke 16:19-31

I rarely consult previous preaching efforts, but out of curiosity went scratching around to see how I handled today's text in 2004. The main focus on that occasion was the inner dimension of the text – Lazarus and the rich man as aspects of the individual psyche, and the call of the gospel for integration and healing of the fragmented aspects of our selves. Because the Biblical texts are inexhaustible, and because there is no single reading of any text, and because, as the early Church Fathers understood, every text has both inner and outer dimensions, in this 'Year C' I want to draw our attention to the outer realities. The awkward truth is that the outer dimension of today's gospel is unpalatable, and it is probably much more pleasant for us to look for some 'spiritual' explanation.

Whilst preparing for this sermon I was also readying myself for yesterday's diocesan discussion about the proposed Anglican Communion Covenant. If the Covenant remains a mystery to you, let me attempt a brief explanation. The Anglican Communion has grown up like topsy, in the last 150 to 200 or so years, making the shift from the Church of England, in England – now an association of local national or provincial episcopally-led, synodically-governed churches in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury – something of a mystery to Protestants. What holds this diverse and autonomous collection of 38 provinces together has more to do with bonds of friendship than with laws, there being no centralised authority within Anglicanism – something of a perplexity to Roman Catholics. In recent times, and especially since the Lambeth Conference of bishops in 1998 a reactionary movement has been mobilising, threatened by plurality and theological development. This reactionism failed in its attempt to split the Communion over the ordination of women – 50% of the population not convinced by medieval sexism. However in the so-called gay issue fervent reactionism has hit its straps – since, as Australians have discovered this week, the politically-minded and the power-fixated are unlikely to risk their power for a mere 10% minority, and a quirky one at that. ¹

To cut the last nine years short (and to oversimplify of course), our global Communion is presently wrangling over the detail and the mechanism of a legal document to hold us together, in an atmosphere of threat that some will leave, or should be expelled. This proposed covenant is motivated by the felt need of some to prevent gays from being ordained and their relationships from being blessed that's actually the bottom line, if I may put it that way. The pretext is that this particular issue represents the 'line in the sand', the litmus test in terms of faithfulness to the Bible. So what we have at the moment is almost every bishop of the Anglican Communion – with few exceptions - pussy-footing around, bullied by an un-holy reactionary alliance constantly issuing threats. In responding to a particular group in England and its threatening statement late last year Bishop of Durham Tom Wright had this to say: "This statement is simply a way of saying, 'We want to run the Church of England in our own way, and we're going to throw crockery around the room until we're allowed to do so.' ² Now there's an honest Episcopal statement! To be blunt, the Communion is in the grip of the bullies in the playground. Furthermore, a colossal and scandalous amount of time and effort is being expended on this exercise.

But the question is not being asked: Is this a legitimate use of our precious resources and efforts, our best minds and bishops? I suspect that this proposed Covenant – and the supposed issue which has apparently made it necessary – is dangerously dishonest, in a number of ways. One of the ways it is dishonest is in its failure to take today's gospel seriously. For what does it mean when wealthy churches spend precious energies and resources debating covenants when poor Lazarus is destitute at the gate? The only way for us to come down out of our ivory religious towers is to be confronted with the harsh and unpalatable reality of starving Lazarus – no doubt, this is why Jesus tells such an uncomfortable parable to the religious leaders: ³ "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts." ⁴ It is the painful

¹ *The Press*, "Aussie Govt puts nuclear dump, gay marriage on hold", Saturday 29 September 2007. <http://www.stuff.co.nz/thepress/4218240a6428.html>

² Bishop Tom Wright, "A Confused 'Covenant': Initial comments on 'A Covenant for the Church of England'", 14 December 2006. <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2006/20061214wright.cfm?doc=171>

³ Luke 16:1

⁴ Luke 16:15

and desperately uncomfortable realities of the Lazarus' of our world which have the capacity to shake us, to wake us up.

Poverty facts though readily accessible are not much discussed, not in the infotainment media, worse still, not by the promoters of a covenant either. I have supplied us with 20 Lazarus facts from the Globalissues web site,⁵ and leave them for you to pray over in your own time. (see reverse panel) I'll mention just the first shocking Lazarus fact: Half the world — nearly three billion people — live on less than two dollars a day. The obvious question needs to be asked: Why are the Primates and Bishops of the Anglican Communion spending their precious energies on this proposed covenant?

Perhaps we feel overwhelmed by the scale and extent of Lazarus in our world? I certainly feel immensely uncomfortable as I have attempted to take in the enormity of the systemic injustice in which I am most certainly implicated as one of the rich men of the world. What can we do? Perhaps like the man in the parable we want to make excuses, for ourselves or others? Perhaps like the Anglican Communion we'd rather play around with a covenant? Jesus' parables work by exposing us, our rationalisations, our superficiality, our self-justifications, our complacency, our self-interest. The parables are the strong medicine of Jesus the healer, like Amos before him, who also did not mince words about economic injustice. Jesus' medicine opens our calloused hearts to the quarterising winds of the Spirit. It is this power of parable which is the door to the kingdom life which is the **εὐαγγέλιον** *euangellion*, the good news. Pray that Jesus' medicine does its work on us and our Communion.

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

Some 21st Century 'Lazarus' Facts

1. Half the world — nearly three billion people — live on less than two dollars a day.
2. The GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of the poorest 48 nations (i.e. a quarter of the world's countries) is less than the wealth of the world's three richest people combined.
3. Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names.
4. Less than one per cent of what the world spent every year on weapons was needed to put every child into school by the year 2000 and yet it didn't happen.
5. 51 percent of the world's 100 hundred wealthiest bodies are corporations.
6. The wealthiest nation on Earth has the widest gap between rich and poor of any industrialized nation.
7. The poorer the country, the more likely it is that debt repayments are being extracted directly from people who neither contracted the loans nor received any of the money.
8. 20% of the population in the developed nations, consume 86% of the world's goods.
9. The top fifth of the world's people in the richest countries enjoy 82% of the expanding export trade and 68% of foreign direct investment — the bottom fifth, barely more than 1%.
10. In 1960, the 20% of the world's people in the richest countries had 30 times the income of the poorest 20% — in 1997, 74 times as much.
11. An analysis of long-term trends shows the distance between the richest and poorest countries was about: 3 to 1 in 1820; 11 to 1 in 1913; 35 to 1 in 1950; 44 to 1 in 1973; 72 to 1 in 1992
12. "The lives of 1.7 million children will be needlessly lost this year [2000] because world governments have failed to reduce poverty levels"
13. The developing world now spends \$13 on debt repayment for every \$1 it receives in grants.
14. A few hundred millionaires now own as much wealth as the world's poorest 2.5 billion people.
15. "The 48 poorest countries account for less than 0.4 per cent of global exports."
16. "The combined wealth of the world's 200 richest people hit \$1 trillion in 1999; the combined incomes of the 582 million people living in the 43 least developed countries is \$146 billion."
17. "Approximately 790 million people in the developing world are still chronically undernourished, almost two-thirds of whom reside in Asia and the Pacific."
18. According to UNICEF, 30,000 children die each day due to poverty. That is about 210,000 children each week, or just under 11 million children under five years of age, each year.
19. The richest 50 million people in Europe and North America have the same income as 2.7 billion poor people.
20. The world's 497 billionaires in 2001 registered a combined wealth of \$1.54 trillion, greater than the combined incomes of the poorest half of humanity.

from <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts.asp>

⁵ Anup Shah, [Poverty Facts and Stats](#), GlobalIssues.org, Last updated: Friday, November 24, 2006, appended below