

Sunday October 14th 2018 ChCh-St. Luke's

Readings:

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Heb 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31 The rich young man

Reflection

'...all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account' so we hear from The Letter to the Hebrews. As I prayed with this reading, the image of my young granddaughters, each lying naked on a change-table, came to mind. A toddler and a newborn, each utterly vulnerable, trusting the parent-figure who knows them completely, and who looks upon them with overwhelming delight and unconditional love (no matter what mess they happen to be in!). Have you ever imagined encountering the divine in this way? Naked and laid bare to divine eyes?

I also called to mind on reflection, the childhood experience of soaking - naked - in the old Hanmer Springs hot pools, in the days when the steaming, sulphurous baths were gender segregated. Once self-consciousness was overcome – it was a liberating experience. Perhaps those who dare take a mid-winter collective swim at the beach.... or the five hundred brave souls who recently participated in the shrouded nude photoshoot by artist Spencer Tunick in a Melbourne Woolworths carpark.... felt that same sense of liberation in collective nakedness – a letting go of personal modesty and social norms; a communal activity for the greater good. Tunick – who has repeated similar shoots around the world - spoke of the beauty and unity expressed in the collective naked form – the opposite of pride and oppression, particularly when participants gathered in places of conflict. What a great leveller!

Physical nakedness is one thing, but being laid bare mentally, emotionally, spiritually – to the absolute depths of our being - is another matter. How does it feel to lay yourself bare before God?

Recall the Prayer of Approach in our New Zealand Prayer Book, inherited from the Book of Common Prayer:

*‘Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known
And from whom no secrets are hidden.....’*

Are these words a comfort or challenge for you? And what does it mean, to be open to the Word of God - *living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; (it is) able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.* Is this what we expect when we come to encounter our Lord?

Comfort...challenge...both?

In today’s gospel story, the rich young man is laid bare before Jesus. He approaches Jesus earnestly, kneeling before him. Although he is clothed with outer layers of confidence, comfortable in his wealth, his lifestyle and beliefs, comfortable in his daily routines and religious practices (a follower of the laws of Moses since his youth) – a self-sufficient man, his inner being seems to be seeking something more. He recognizes Jesus as a Good Teacher, and comes with a question: *“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

I wonder what reply he was hoping for – a kindly affirmation of all he was already doing? A simple, not-too-costly offering perhaps? An assurance that God had blessed him with wealth for his obedience, in line with the theology found in the book of Deuteronomy (and still subscribed to in some Christian circles today)? Jesus could well have responded – do you want me to tell you *easy* things?

But the Religious Imagineer, Jim Friedrichⁱ, considers the gospel encounter this way....

‘If this were a movie we’d get a close-up of Jesus’ face, taking in the rich young man’s truest and best self with a piercing gaze that is both affectionate and inquisitive, as though his eyes are asking, “Are you the disciple I’ve been waiting for so long to show up, the disciple whose singleness of heart, shorn of all lesser desires, wants nothing but the only thing truly worth having?” Then we’d cut to a close-up of the rich man’s face, so earnest and hopeful, on the verge of finding at last his heart’s true desire.

But then Jesus says to him, “There’s just one more thing you need to do; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.”

We can imagine the man’s expectant face slowly collapsing into disappointment. This is not what he wanted to hear. He lowers his head and stares at the ground, trying to absorb the shock of Jesus’ shattering directive. Then he gets up and backs away slowly, like a boxer reeling from a punch, until he finally turns his back on Jesus and disappears into the crowd. As Mark reports, he “was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” We could add “and he couldn’t let them go.”

The rich young man had been laid bare before the loving gaze of Jesus, but he could not let go of what bound him. He could not release that which prevented his experiencing fullness of life. Most of us – particularly in the affluent West – are challenged by this. But was this more than an individual challenge?

In first-century Palestine, wealth was measured more by the amount of land you owned than by the number of things you had. And since land acquisition usually came through the default of debtors who could not keep up their payments, wealth at the top was accrued at the expense of those further down the economic ladder. More wealth for the rich meant more poverty for the rest.

There is something about wealth that has a way of taking over our hearts and lives. It is unavoidable. Jesus said: “you cannot serve God and wealth” (Matt. 6:24). He wasn’t the first to say it. Prophets like Amos repeatedly warned against the dangers of wealth as he called for justice ‘*Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate*’.

In the Gospels Jesus echoed that warning again and again. In the parable of the Sower he said that the seed in the thorny ground didn’t bear fruit because “the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing” (Mk 4:19).

The question that Jesus poses to the rich man, and to us, is not simply about the individual stewardship of our personal wealth, but about our willingness to work and pray for a very different kind of economy.

It has been suggested that a better term for the *Kingdom* of God would be the Economy of God, something that was first described in the Book of Exodus. God delivered the people of Israel from the unjust slave economy of Egypt, and then spent the next 40 years providing a desert workshop, trying to teach them a new economy, a new way of living together—without greed, fear, or self-protective violence.

In the Economy of God the categories of rich and poor vanish with the just distribution of divine abundance. In the Economy of God, there is faithful stewardship of Creation, healing and compassion towards all living things.

When Jesus invites the rich man to let go not only of his wealth, but also of his participation in an unjust economy, he is calling him out of his comfort zone into an entirely new way of being. That's what Jesus did, and what Jesus continues to do. As one theologian has said, "Meeting Jesus always seemed to shake people up. He constantly pushed them to think beyond their own immediate interests, to picture themselves in a variety of situations in which choice and action were required – in short, to use their imaginations."

For the rich young man to release his wealth and follow Jesus would entail losing his grip on wealth and power, becoming vulnerable and sharing with others, relying on community and fellowship.

The rich man is in all of us - shocked by the call to choose and help bring into being the Economy of God. Yet Jesus looks directly at us – gazing deep into our souls – with love. Can we lay ourselves bare before the divine? Jesus asks us to do what seems impossible, yet with God *is* possible.

I conclude with words from Michael Leunig:

We loosen our grip.

We open our hand.

We are accepting.

In our empty hand

We feel the shape

Of simple eternity.

It nestles there.

We hold it gently.

We are accepting. Amen.

ⁱ <https://jimfriedrich.com/2018/10/12/jesus-and-the-rich-man-do-you-want-me-to-tell-you-easy-things/>