

Sermon 18th September 2022

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 and Luke 16:1-13

Last week's reading from Jeremiah was difficult to hear, this week we will hear the prophet lament over the way in which his people refuse to turn back to God. Jeremiah's words this week sound a lot more like the God I know, and trust revealed in Jesus. Does God also mourn over us, does God feel the same kind of despair that Jeremiah does, when humans become entrenched in violence as both perpetrator and victim?

We will hear only a small section of chapter eight this morning, the nice bit but if you thought last week's reading was rough, the beginning of this chapter is truly dreadful, listen to the way one commentator describes it, the verses before today's reading are "generalised condemnations which justify all manner of horrific violence... with God portrayed as a vindictive abuser punishing his beloved to teach them lesson".

I really wish I had read that before last week's sermon because I would have chosen my illustration more carefully. I do not believe that God punishes us to teach us a lesson or cause bad things to happen to us for our own good. That is not the God I know through Jesus Christ. We have moved on from the days of regarding God, as an ancient deity, who resembles the pagan gods and idols of old. So hear both of today's readings in the light of Jesus Christ, the one who offers us forgiveness, understanding and compassion.

There are hundreds of plausible explanations out there for this tricky story in Luke but instead of going down a rabbit hole of theological juggling we will focus on the parable's conclusion, verse 13.

¹³ "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

Right throughout Luke, Jesus teaches us that money and wealth are not to be our prime concern, and that God's heart is with the poor, the lost and the forsaken. From Mary's great prayer in which the lowly will be lifted, to Jesus rebuking Satan's offer of a full belly, power and status, to Jesus proclaiming blessings to the poor and woes to the rich, Jesus teaching his disciples not to worry about what they wear or eat, Jesus taught us to pray only for our daily bread, he teaches that our hospitality is to resemble the generosity of the

heavenly banquet, and then we have today's parable, which sits sandwiched between other teachings regarding riches and wealth. Back in Luke 12 we read about the rich fool, who built larger barns to house all his wealth; he then died and as the saying goes, he couldn't take it with him. In Luke 14, Jesus tells his disciples that if they are to follow him they must give away all their possessions and following today's reading in Luke 16 we hear the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The rich man lived a very comfortable life and in his lifetime ignored the plight of the poor or Lazarus, the man covered in sores who had to beg for scraps of food. They both die. Who do you think ends up existing in peace and comfort??

It should be easy to give a resounding vote for poor Lazarus because as followers of Jesus we know that the kingdom he proclaims, the kingdom we belong to, is one based on justice for the poor, those who are lost, the outcasts and the disenfranchised. The difficulty that arises for most of us, living in a wealthy and prosperous nation is to understand the place of money, possessions, and wealth in our own lives.

It should unsettle us to realise that globally we are amongst the top ten percent of that world's wealthiest inhabitants. We might whinge about this and that but most of us are undeniably comfortable. So how do we who take so much for granted live according to the way of Jesus?

Well it is not easy. Our economy is set up in such a way to encourage the cult of more, of bigger and better. We are all sucked in to a system that says progress is good and consumerism is the road to a perfect life and the way in which our society reinforces these ideals is incredibly sneaky. Take for instance our smart phones and laptops; even when we have no intention of shopping, ads for this and that appear from nowhere. Well that's not entirely true, our phones are listening in and collecting data, watching where we go within the world wide web, seeing what we like and what we watch and engage with via social media and websites. Sneaky, indeed, not to mention shrewd, and cunning.

As a rich white woman, with privilege and a comfortable lifestyle I really struggle with Jesus' words today. The best I can come up with is to use my wealth and privilege in ways that best proclaim God's kingdom of grace, freedom, and justice. Like the wealthy house church leaders we read about in the NT, our wealth should be used for good, to promote God's kingdom and to provide for those in need.

One way we can use our wealth for good is to shop wisely and fairly, and support worthy causes that tug at our heartstrings. May God's Holy Spirit prod you and prompt you to act wisely with all our gifts, time, talents and finances.

Amen