

**A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole**  
**The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Sunday, September 29, 2019**

Amos 6:1a,4-7

Psalm 146

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Poet - Edgar Guest wrote this poem called Service.

I have no wealth of gold to give away,  
But I can pledge to worthy causes these:  
I'll give my strength, my days and hours of ease,  
My finest thought and courage when I may,  
And take some deed accomplished for my pay.  
I cannot offer much in silver fees,  
But I can serve when richer persons play,  
And with my presence fill some vacancies.

There are some things beyond the gift of gold,  
A richer treasure's needed now and then;  
Some joys life needs which are not bought and sold—  
The high occasion often calls for men.  
Some for release from service give their pelf,  
But he gives most who freely gives himself.

When I was growing up I remember a lesson my parents would repeat to us from time to time, “Timothy’, I can hear them both say, “you can do without the necessities as long as you have some of the luxuries”. Given the pretty profound poverty that Episcopalian Clergy in Scotland lived in in those days, I realize that my parents really did live that. My father first stipend as a Rector in 1960 was about \$1000 per year. They did without and somehow managed to send all three of us to fee-paying schools. They never went on holiday abroad for the first 23 years of their marriage. Even so they always managed to have Champagne and smoked salmon when the occasion required and I never for a moment thought we lacked for anything. I must admit that German Sekt did appear in place of Champagne for bigger parties!

As we say goodbye to Elizabeth today, I am conscious that both of us are children of Episcopalian Priests. I don't know Elizabeth, but I suspect, it might be true of you as it is of me, that to be a "true child in the faith", as St Paul called the recipient of today's Epistle, is both an onerous as well as a precious heritage to live up to. I can still hear my father's voice at the altar and in so many pastoral situations. I suspect that many people here, after your first five and a half years of ministry, all of them in this Church, will still hear your voice in those words in times to come also. 'Be swift to be kind...'

"If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Today's Gospel about the rich man, often called Dives, and Lazarus follows hard on the heels on last week's words "You cannot serve God and wealth". One begins to think that the compilers of the lectionary are, not very subtly, playing to the fact that most churches are thinking about Stewardship at this time of year! Well, stewardship is important and what we spend our money on and how much, does speak volumes about who we are, what we believe, and our priorities in life. Jesus' story in the Gospel today, however, goes beyond that and right to the heart of how faith and life confront each other.

Two things about this reading come to the fore for me today.

First, it is clear that the real focus of this reading is not poverty and riches per se but rather about willful deafness to what God is saying to us. Jesus is saying loud and clear that we will not be able to plead ignorance or say we did not know what God requires of us.

It calls to mind the Scottish hell fire and brimstone preacher preaching passionately about Pharaoh and his chariots being swallowed up by the red sea after Moses has closed the waters behind the people of Israel. In colloquial Scots the word 'ken' means 'know' – "I didnea ken" means "I didn't know". And the preacher describes how Pharaoh drowning in the sea came up for the first time and he cries out to God "Lord, Lord I didnea ken!" And he goes down under the water. He comes up for the second time and cries, "Lord, Lord I didnea ken!" and he goes down under the water. And he comes up for the third and final time and cries, "Lord, Lord I didnea ken!" And a voice came from heaven "Well ye ken noo!"

One cannot ever imagine Moses saying to Lazarus “Well ye ken noo!” but Jesus is saying to his hearers that they can’t plead ignorance when they’re lives are done. They do have Moses and the prophets, and they should listen to them. And, he says, even if one should rise from the dead and give them the same warnings they won’t listen to him either. In this, of course, he is prophesying about himself because, as we know, Jesus did rise from the dead and, even so, there are still many Lazarus’ sitting by the gates of our houses in the world. We won’t be able to say “I didna ken” either.

The sin of Dives was that he could look on the world's suffering and need and feel no answering sword of grief and pity pierce his heart; he looked at a fellow-man, hungry and in pain, and did nothing about it. His was the punishment of the man who never noticed.

Part of who we are as Christians and as a Church is that we try to notice. We doubtless do not notice enough, but we try to notice some. At Christ Church, we give a tithe, one tenth of our pledged income to the poor, and those in need, through our various mission partners here and in other parts of the world. Many of you, I know, have volunteered in the Soup Kitchen, on the Grate Patrol and at So that Others Might Eat. Many of you also, I know, support many of these mission partners like Bishop Walkers School and the Homeless Charity Georgetown Ministry Centre very substantially quite separately from what you give through the Church’s tithe. Someone very generously gave me a check for \$10,000 for one of these mission partners last week. In truth, I suspect that what we give as a Church including these private acts of charity amounts to many times that 10% of our pledge income each year. We also give substantially to the support of the wider Church and those parishes in less strong financial positions than our own. All of it is giving that comes from the faith that we share here, a faith that responds to this Gospel we hear today, and the wider Gospel we hear week by week.

The Second thing that strikes me is that when we do notice, when we do attend to the needs of others, rather than this being another burden that we take on, this action in fact makes us feel lighter. A number of people have told me that they have done something like volunteer in our winter shelter or have given of themselves in some way to help other people, really initially out of a sense of obligation or duty,

but, how they have been surprised, not only that it turned out not to be a burden, but that it actually turned out to be a genuine joy to them. When the Prayer Book Collect for Peace says that to act in God's service is "perfect freedom" we perhaps quietly question that, but when we do serve, we discover that this is actually true in practice! The sad thing about Dives is that, not only does he lose his soul, he also misses out on a deep well of joy in his life.

In his book "The Second Mountain" David Brooks describes how people discover this truth and how it can revolutionize their lives. He cites many examples. One is Abraham Lincoln "who, as a young man had a ferocious hunger for fame and power, to the point where he was scared by the intensity of his own hunger". Later, though, in the great crisis of the Civil War, Lincoln abandoned himself entirely to preserving the Union. Brooks describes and incident where, as President, he is left waiting for General George McClellan in a parlor only to be told, after an hour and half, that the General had retired for the night and would see him another day. Despite the fury of the people accompanying him at such a slight, Lincoln said, "Better at this time not to be making points of etiquette and personal dignity." David Brooks says, " This was not about him.... By this point Lincoln had given himself away. The cause was the center of his life." As the Guest poem we began with says, " he gives most who freely gives him."

As Christians, we hear Jesus say to us, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." But we have to learn and re-learn that this is actually true, that his service is indeed perfect freedom, that by giving of ourselves, our time, talent and substance for others, really does bring us lightness of being, peace of heart and mind and newness of life.

There is no getting away from the fact that today's Gospel is uncomfortable stuff. We can't avoid seeing ourselves in the Rich man, and we should not avoid it. We must not be deaf and blind like him. We know when our lives are at an end, we cannot say 'We didna ken!'