

Year C Proper 26 25th September 2022

As we draw near to the end of our creation season, culminating in our Harvest Festival next Sunday, let me offer one general observation about our late Queen. It seems to me that she was never happier than being out and about in one of the most beautiful parts of God's creation in the Scottish Highlands, and I am in no doubt that she would regularly have given thanks in her prayers for that particular privilege.

You don't have to own a large estate or be a monarch to enjoy the beauty of God's creation, it surrounds us almost wherever we look and yet all too often we ignore it, we fail to see in any meaningful sense what is in front of our eyes. We don't have to travel very far from this building to enjoy that beauty – and for free.

But it would be idle to pretend that humankind has not also managed to do considerable damage to creation, mainly through either greed or indifference or plain thoughtlessness – and sometimes ignorance too, although advances in scientific and medical knowledge over the last 50 to 100 years means it has become harder and harder, if not impossible, to blame the damage we are doing on ignorance.

The compilers of today's lectionary readings have a clear thread running through them – clearer than it often is if I'm being honest – that wealth can be a real hindrance to the purposes of God's creation.

Before I turn to the readings, let me spend literally a few moments defining that purpose? To put it at its very broadest – and we can see this from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation – it is for human flourishing, which of course is centred on our close relationship with God but goes so much wider and further than that. And alongside that is the idea that all creation, every living part of it, should also flourish. We have to say that, as human beings who have been given dominion over everything else on earth, we have been making a pretty poor fist of it not least because we have seen our role as domination.

All of our readings point to the danger of allowing wealth to blind us to what is going on around us. That is not the same as saying wealth is bad in itself, Jesus never said that, rather he only spoke about the dangers of wealth.

Paul's warning to Timothy has often been shortened to the idea that money is **the** root of all evil. But that's not what he said. What he actually said was that money is **a** root of **all kinds** of evil – which puts a very different slant on it.

Some people can handle wealth responsibly and for the greater good. In this era, perhaps the best example is Warren Buffett. Unimaginably wealthy, he has lived in the same house he bought more than 50 years ago – incidentally in the small town of Omaha, Nebraska, where he was born. And of course, he was the co-founder of The Pledge, through which hundreds of very wealthy people have promised to donate at least half their wealth to philanthropy on their death.

His co-founder was Bill Gates, who somehow keeps getting richer and richer, despite having already given much of his wealth to the Gates Foundation. But Gates insists he is determined to fall off the world's rich list.

“I have an obligation to return my resources to society in ways that have the greatest impact for reducing suffering and improving lives. And I hope others in positions of great wealth and privilege will step up in this moment too”, Gates said in a statement in July.

It has been said of Bill Gates that some of his business practices as he built up Microsoft were unethical, but that could truthfully and easily be said of earlier moguls like Andrew Carnegie, Andrew Mellon or John Rockefeller. But the point is, without going into their motivation, they all realised that hoarding all their wealth was not the right thing to do, that having taken they should give back.

Contrast that with our Amos reading, where the prophet berates the nobles for lying on their ivory beds and lounging on their couches eating the fat of the land, while failing to grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Their reward – the first to go into exile.

Paul urges Timothy to tell the rich not to rely on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who gives them everything they need for their enjoyment.

They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life, Paul says.

But perhaps Jesus' words are the toughest of all. The rich man was condemned to a life in Hades because he was unwilling to see what was around him, to see the need to restore creation to what God intended, by his refusal to help Lazarus, the beggar lying outside his front gate who got more support from the dogs licking his sores than he did from the rich man.

Did you know that Lazarus is the only character in all of Jesus' parables who is given a name? I hadn't taken that on board until preparing this talk, but it only goes to emphasise' Jesus' bias to the poor and marginalised.

What I find most extraordinary about this parable is not that the rich man, and he was probably very rich by the standards of the day, failed to notice Lazarus begging outside his gate, but that in death, when he was in Hades and Lazarus was with Abraham, the rich man still presumed he could treat Lazarus as his servant – and he tries it on twice.

Not surprisingly Abraham wasn't having any of it and makes the very pointed remark that if the rich man's brothers don't accept Moses and the prophets in the first place, who are offering them all they need, then they are not going to be convinced by someone rising from the dead. I wonder who Jesus could possibly be referring to!

The chasm that according to Abraham is too great for the rich man and Lazarus to cross wasn't built by God, it was built by us. And It wasn't just the Pharisees and everyone else at that time who refused to see Jesus for who he was and what he was offering. Sadly, it's us today too.

The chasm between creation as it was intended and creation as it is, was also created by us. Take climate change; it's hard to deny that our generation has let down the young, they are going to pay the price of our profligacy. It's going to be hard to dismantle a deeply entrenched system of living that isn't working for the majority of people. And it's tiring as we get older to stay engaged in a world that's so broken.

So perhaps the rich man chose not to see the need all around him, because the system as it was worked just fine for him and it was too much for him to challenge it, knowing that it would cost him to do so successfully.

What this parable perhaps tells us above all is that the danger is not wealth per se, rather the danger of pursuing riches is moral blindness, the danger is apathy, complacency and indifference, and an inability to see real need when it

is right in front of us. This parable tells us that our options are not infinite, that our time is not limitless.

We need to see as Jesus sees, to see our own complicity in the world's brokenness, that our own inability to acknowledge that we have enough, more than enough in many cases, is contributing to the poverty of others. That it is us who are impoverished by our unwillingness to grieve for those for whom Jesus had a special spot, the marginalised, the poor, the sick.

It would be all too easy to say – well put on a hairshirt and live in poverty so that we can show solidarity with the have-nots of this world.

But I don't think that's the point of this parable. Yes, we can all live simpler lives and we probably should, and we should certainly do what we can to minimise our environmental footprint.

Yet there are times when other things, particularly issues affecting our families, have to take priority. If that means buying carbon offsets, then so be it, and we shouldn't feel guilty about it

Caring for creation is about far more than tackling climate change and generally looking after the environment. Unlike the rich man in the parable, we need to start from the principle that God's intention is for all of creation to flourish. Yet, was even the rich man flourishing as God defines flourishing? I think not, he too belonged to the lost who Jesus came to set free.

We need to really see what is in front of us and not to ignore it. Each of us can only do what we can do, be that a little or a lot, and again we shouldn't feel guilty if we can only do what seems to us to be a little, because God knows our limitations, whether they be emotional, financial or even just time.

But there is no way creation can flourish in all its intended fullness if, like the rich man, we take the attitude of move along, nothing to see. That is not God's way and should not be ours either.

The Bible tells us creation is good. To keep it that way, to restore it even, our task is to focus on what we see in front of us and do what we can, how we can, when we can and where we can.

That is how, in Paul's words, we may take hold of the life that really is life