NORTH NIBLEY

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Colossians 3.1-11 Luke 12.12-21

I must say that the gospel parable makes me a bit uneasy. I’ve been retired for a year now and my wife has laid up enough, we hope, for many years. And people seem to expect retirement to be a time to enjoy oneself … Our whole society encourages us to put wealth by; our economy depends on us doing so – no investment, no industry or mortgages to enable people to buy houses. Is the parable aimed at us?

Well, it does no harm to be a bit uneasy about it, to keep ourselves from the smugness of the rich fool in our story. And a distrust of wealth seems to have been very strong in Jesus. The rich young ruler was told to sell all he had and follow Jesus, and found it hard. Jesus commented, ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.’ That’s pretty stiff, even if we allow for Jesus’ use of vivid and extreme language to make points, and that cities included a little gate called the eye of a needle – to get through it a camel would probably need to be unloaded! The disciples were astonished and wondered how anyone could be saved. Jesus said, ‘For humans, impossible, but not for God – all things are possible with God.’ In the light of the cross, we can say that this goes for all of us, rich or poor – we are all saved by God’s grace, God’s free love. God in Jesus does what is impossible to us, forgiving us beyond our deserts.

But that still leaves some stiff comments on riches. Jesus says somewhere that no one can follow him without saying farewell to all their possessions. So where does that leave us?

Well, a couple of weeks ago was Mary Magdalene’s day. Tradition has had lurid things to say of her, but the gospels say she was a rich woman whom Jesus cured from severe mental problems, who then became one of several women who supported Jesus and his followers with their wealth. They hadn’t given it all away – they could buy spices to anoint Jesus’ body. Martha and Mary of Bethany [a different Mary from Mary Magdalene] also had enough to give Jesus hospitality and in Mary’s case to get expensive perfume to anoint Jesus’ feet. Paul, as so often, is gentler than Jesus. He just expects generosity in helping the needy.

Luke is the most chilly about having wealth, but this morning’s reading doesn’t say anything so different from Paul, and is perhaps a useful key to Jesus’ attitude to wealth. Luke puts it after Jesus has been warning his disciples of persecutions, and telling them to trust the Holy Spirit to guide them what to say when on trial. And up speaks this person asking Jesus to help him get some inheritance from his brother. It’s a bit like interrupting a programme of David Attenborough warning about global climate change disaster with an advert for luxury cars. No wonder if Jesus was a bit exasperated and gave a stiff reply! We don’t know if the man was greedy, but his concern for wealth had apparently deafened him to wider concerns. And if we get obsessed by material wealth, property and possessions, then we are all too likely to be unable to give proper concern for other and more important things still. Re-enter David Attenborough, old Uncle Extinction Rebellion and all to warn of the dangers of a consumerist society, unbridled capitalism, etc. Jesus is bang up to date in his warnings about too much greed for wealth.

In the parable, note that the rich man is entirely selfish. He has had a bumper harvest. That would be seen as a blessing. But his only response is to think of his pleasures – eat, drink and enjoy yourself. Maybe he was going to die that night from overindulgence! He had no idea of sharing with the needy, of helping others.

The story of the rich fool, in fact, is about the dangers of greed and selfishness crowding out faith, trust, and love. The man has a certain faith, I suppose – humans have to have some sort of faith, confidence, to survive. But he has replaced trust in God with trust in riches, and forgetfulness of the fragility of human life. He has no faith, or a false faith. As our epistle reading says, greed is idolatry. And this greed, this replacing faith in God with false faith in wealth or power – mere earthly life, destroys love and is all too liable to lead to all sorts of other abuses, as listed in the epistle reading – evil desire, passion, anger, malice, slander, [does this fit the man who petitioned Jesus against his brother?], lying, impurity and fornication. We need faith in the God of love, so that we know love is what matters most, with its kindness, consideration, generosity, helpfulness, trying to be patient, and so on. Greed and self-indulgence divide people; love unites. And our epistle stresses Jesus bringing people together in love – Greek and Jew, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free. Religious hatreds, [which divided Jew and Greek] the pride of civilisations [which divided Greeks from barbarians] and the particular divisiveness of wealth and power [which divided and divides rich and powerful from poor and enslaved] are to be overcome in Christ. This list parallels that in Galatians, which adds male, and female, and so the use of gender to divide and oppress others. We can’t abolish all these differences – linguistic, cultural, gender and so on – and to try to by force would create worse evils. So with differences in wealth. To try to make people identical, and to force equality in wealth are impossible and would create evils of their own, as efforts to achieve them have done! But we can seek to make the differences less oppressive, and to care for all. Governments and laws have a part to play here, but cannot bring human life to its goals of goodness and love. Our goal is found in Christ and his way, the incarnation of generous, self-giving faith and love, the way of God who is love, in the self-giving and sharing life of the Trinity, to whom, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all glory and praise for ever and ever. Amen.

**Loving, generous God,**

**whose Son Jesus Christ gave himself for us in faith in you,**

**with the utmost generosity and love,**

**may we live by trust in you through him,**

**and not in trust in money or earthly power.**

**So may we live in generosity and kindness,**

**and further your reign of love,**

**through the same Jesus Christ**

**our Brother, Friend, Saviour and Lord.**

**Amen.**