

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2109

St Paul tells his young protégé Timothy to live thankfully. It is one of the central tenets of Christian living.

Around the world on Friday last young people left their studies and took to the streets to protest government inaction on Climate Change. I spotted a group of youngsters and shouted at them, to get a job! I realised at the head of the crocodile was a senior member of the congregation, she waved at me, at least I think it was a wave! Later that evening at Youth Group someone related they had seen a placard at a rally which read 'Eat the Rich! We thought about this and wondered if this was getting closer to the issue; but perhaps it is not just wealth that is the issue but the matter of consumption or more accurately waste. Until we address this then we are not going to be able to deal with this environmental crisis. Anthropocentric Climate Change does not feature in our Scriptures or Tradition but the issue of wealth and consumption and waste most certainly does.

Having spent time in both Afghanistan and Timor Leste, two of the world poorest nations, I have seen grinding poverty and what it does. Living alongside those folk is very difficult, you become very much aware of the vast disparity in our wealth; it made for some uncomfortable times. I remember in Dili going into bat for the family who came onto the base on Sunday evening's selling burnt DVDs. My predecessor, a rather earnest Protestant, felt that they should be banned because of doubt over the legality of their goods. I didn't have the courage to tell the troops that I had banned the DVD man and in place of it we would be listening to a series of studies on the prophet Haggai. It was the families only source of income. One movie I bought was Martin Scorsese's 'Shutter Island' starring Leonardo De Caprio. As a morale booster I decided to put on a movie night to coincide with the issue of our alcohol ration. I decided to show Shutter Island, I had seen the movie in my hut and enjoyed it immensely so I decided to show it on the big screen in the briefing room. A crowd gathered all clutching their meagre ration of beer or wine, we dimmed the lights and the movie began. Without giving too much away this movie has a massive plot twist, and just as this twist was unfolding before our very eyes the DVD jammed and that was it, we never saw the end. I thought there might be riot. My Protestant colleague would no doubt have said I was receiving my just deserts!

I mention this for two reasons, one to highlight the complexity of the ethics and politics of poverty, wealth and consumption, and two because I was reminded that when we read or listen to parables we need to be watching out for the twist. When we hear these parables we adopt a position, we are almost seduced into thinking in a particular way, which

is then subverted and we are left wondering. All our preconceived ideas are turned upside. We have just heard the opening of chapter sixteen of Luke's gospel. What comes immediately before it is important. The second half of chapter fifteen is taken up by the story of the Prodigal Son. It concludes: *...this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.* Chapter sixteen begins: *Then Jesus said to the disciples, 'There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property.* First thing to say is that Luke wants us to understand that the audience is the same. The shocking story of the Prodigal Son almost continues as if Jesus has more to say on this. What is significant is that the prodigal son and the unjust steward have set their hearts on riches, they are both charged with squandering property that did not belong to them, both have been extraordinarily wasteful. And they both hatch ingenious plots to get right again with their master. Jesus has something to say about this.

When I began to consider the passage we heard this morning I turned to a commentary and read: Few texts have been more difficult for the church than the parable of the unjust steward; not an encouraging start. I am presuming many of you, like me, are not too sure what to make of this parable. I'm going to go out on a limb this morning and invite you to join me, it is a little precarious! The Steward has been wasteful with his master's resources and is to be banished. He recalls his master's debts reducing them so as to curry favour with his debtors. Some commentators say that the amount he took off was his own commission. But this doesn't add up, because he is described as dishonest or unjust, and then to make matters worse we are then told that he was praised by the owner for his dishonesty.

When I read it I hear: "Well in certain circumstances, it is acceptable to be dishonest with wealth— as long as it is for your personal benefit and lets you make friends." It seems to me that Jesus is telling this parable with his tongue firmly in his cheek. This surely is Jesus at his ironical best. And this is born out at the end when he says if you cannot even be trusted with wealth obtained dishonestly what of true riches, and he ends unambiguously you cannot serve God and Mammon.

We too are simply stewards, we are entrusted with God's creation. We too have squandered it in so many ways and continue to do so. We are continually trying to find ways to keep the ball rolling to make economic friends, sometimes it should be said hypocritically if not dishonestly. We continue to debate endlessly over the issue of climate without, it seems, considering that our consumption and wastefulness lie at the heart of the problem that besets us. My friends, I think it is becoming

increasingly clear that we can only begin to resolve the issues of our day by living more thankfully, simply and justly, at one with each other – listen to Amos, and with the created order. This includes the way we engage with each other over these crucial issues. The level of vitriol and hatred is extraordinary. We would do well to consider Jesus' approach and gently and kindly and perhaps even with a hint of irony encourage one another to thankfulness, simplicity and justice. This surely is at the heart of Christian living; Jesus' words challenge us. Are our lives lived in the service of God or consumption?