

Greed and isolation

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year C — 25 September 2022.

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Amos 6.1a, 4–7; Psalm 146; Timothy 6.1–19; Luke 16.19–31

It is intriguing to read these letters under Paul's name, the two letters to Timothy and the letter to Titus and to see in them a new Christian community developing with all the issues and problems that come with creating new ways of living together. We mustn't underestimate the very radical nature of these communities; we do tend to look at them with 21st century eyes and that can tend to cloud our judgement. These communities were revolutionary. Little wonder that they caught the attention of authorities, for they were subversive, they challenged what many considered to be 'the natural order of things.' Last week, the women were told to dress down a little and the men were told to shut up. The fact that they were together says something. The fact that clearly there were poorer people in the gathering is also significant and as for telling the men to pipe down ... well! The extraordinary thing is that the issues that these communities faced keep resurfacing through Christian history.

This last week we completed a journey in which we listened to the Uluru statement. What this journey has shown, among other things is what happens when two ways of living together collide. Laying aside the politics of race and reconciliation, what was extraordinary was the clash of cultures. This clash created a wound that is yet to heal. The first Europeans looked through a cultural lens that linked work, civilisation and thence Christianity. A Lutheran Missionary saw the need to give European goods to the Aboriginal people to create in them 'a desire for such things and therefore they will work to gain them.' The Anglican Samuel Marsden wrote that the Aborigines were 'not materially minded,' he felt that the 'absence of wants' impedes the gospel. One writer wrote how can the Aborigines ever own property if they persist in sharing! I'm baffled how these men could possibly deduce this thinking from the gospels.

At the end of last week's gospel reading, Jesus says quite clearly "you cannot serve God and wealth." Paul confesses in Romans 7 he would not have known sin, he would not have known the many forms of covetousness that possessed his life, if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."

We heard this morning in the first letter to Timothy Paul suggesting that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil leading some to wander away from the faith because of the self-inflicted pains they have suffered due to their desire for money. In Colossians Paul lists vices including greed which he should be put to death.

In the book of James, Christians are unrelentingly chastised for thinking they can delay doing God's will in order that they can go to this town or that town to do business and make money. Such people simply fail to realize that their wealth will not save them from miseries or death. James is very blunt: "*You want something and you do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.*" Scripture is clear. If you are a Christian who is wealthy or desire to have wealth you have a problem.

Plotting Christian history is a fascinating exercise in understanding wealth. The Desert Fathers of the Egyptian wilderness thought greed to be the sin that birthed the other sins; but the very monastic orders that were founded on their ideals became great businesses. In Western Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries there is a distinct increase in references

to the sin of greed by theologians and bishops. Money, it seems, allowed more people to manifest signs of wealth which meant the more wealth they had the more wealth they needed to sustain the wealth they had. For the rich, there is never enough, I think we can easily relate to this. It took a character like Saint Francis to show that Christians had lost the ability to recognize how greed possessed our lives. The subsequent development of the Franciscan order was crucial for the acknowledgment by the church that the church itself was possessed by possessions.

The Reformation came and, with it, Martin Luther who observed that the rich and arrogant people of his day no longer heed the warning contained in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, because the rich think of themselves as pious and without greed, a vice has been turned into virtue. Greed has come to be viewed as being talented, smart and a careful steward. Therefore he wrote “neither prince nor peasant, nobleman nor average citizen is any longer considered greedy, but only upstanding, the common consensus being that the man who prudently provides for himself is a resourceful person who knows how to take care of himself.”

In our day greed is seldom identified as a major problem for Christians. There are many other issues that concern the Church. So, what are we to do? How do we understand the teaching of the prophets and Jesus and Paul on the question of wealth?

From the middle of the 1850's something important began to change, which still impacts theology today. People stopping believing in hell. There were many reasons for this, societal, legal, theological. Clearly many folk could not reconcile the horrors of hell as described this morning, with the grace and mercy of God. The problem is that many still see the Church and God as the means to an end, and that end is simply to be delivered from the perils of damnation to the joys of Paradise. These folk stay away from our worshipping communities!

So we need to rethink and ask the question - what is the problem, from what are we saved? Is it death, sin or evil? These are problems yes, but clearly they not at the forefront of people's minds and hearts. Death is something that happens away from everyday life, we don't think about it too much, and as for sin and evil these too rarely rate a mention. I'm not suggesting that we don't engage with these issues, they are crucial. But we need another paradigm alongside these two through which we can understand salvation. So, what are the problems of our day? Is the human problem isolation? It would appear so. And when we are isolated, we fail to come anywhere near realising our own potential and we fail to enjoy the gift of one another. Greed is the cause of much of the isolation that is so prevalent in our community, this is the message of today's passage from Luke of the rich man and Lazarus.

The solution? It is offered us by God in Christ, it is the revelation of the heart of God and the paradigm of abundant life. Remember the words of Jesus “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Is this the antidote to the greed that stalks so close and from there the isolation that mars our society. Is this understanding the beginning of a revived understanding of God and Church? We as a parish need to consider such things as we seek to be renewed and to bring abundant life to our community. Amen.