

Sermon Preached 22nd March 2020 by Revd Tony Rindl, St Mary's Church

MATTHEW 6:1-4 & 19-24

Christian attitude to wealth

When I put the sermon series together and chose to preach on the Christian attitude to wealth I never in my wildest imagination thought I would be talking about toilet rolls. Nor did I imagine I would be preaching in an empty church.

But here we are, these are the strange times we are living in.

At this present time, we have no idea how long this situation will last and how it will all develop. It is a very scary situation and there is no hiding from that and if you are over 70 or with a chronic illness such as asthma - as I have, we are naturally concerned not just for ourselves but for everyone else who falls into that category.

I wrestled long and hard as to whether I should visit my 90 year old mother last week and I am so glad I went because as things stand I don't know when I will next be able to visit.

Thank God for phones, thank God for emails, and thank God for the world wide web. I am sure we will get through this if we follow the advice that we are given by the government, who are being advised by medical experts who are using the latest scientific technology and understanding to contain this outbreak.

But let's be positive, in the end we could have a better world as we reassess what is important and what makes for a better society, a cleaner, safer, more generous, more equal society and associated with all of that is what we might call the values of the Kingdom of God, and therefore what should be the Christian attitude to wealth and it begins with toilet paper – something most of us have always taken for granted, until we go into our supermarkets and see for ourselves the empty shelves.

Of course we need to think carefully about what we need should we have to self-isolate but I think most of us would agree seeing those shelves empty is shocking and appalling, and what shocks us and appals us most is we know that the elderly and the vulnerable and those with limited money and resources are the ones who are most likely to suffer because of others greed and selfishness.

But here is the sting in the tail the elderly, the vulnerable and the poor have always suffered because of the greed and selfishness of others.

And yes it is not right.

We live in a world where the world's richest 1% have more than twice as much wealth as 6.9 billion people put together.

Just think about that astonishing statistic. The world's richest 1% have more than twice as much wealth as 6.9 billion people put together. It just demonstrates the scale of inequality in the world today. In a world where some 1.1 billion people in developing countries have inadequate access to water, and 2.6 billion lack basic sanitation we can see how quickly disease can spread.

It is not rocket science. The hard facts are it is not coronavirus that is the problem here, it is society's inability to look after its most vulnerable that is the real problem.

I remember the Archbishop of York once saying the hallmarks of a good society is one that looks after its young and the vulnerable.

It is not difficult to see where the gaps are. We are told very wisely to self-isolate if we are at risk of passing on the virus to others or if we fall into those categories deemed to be more vulnerable, so as to minimize the risk of catching coronavirus.

But what if you are homeless? Please spare a thought for those out on our streets and those who sofa surf and are at greater risk. Please pray for them and pray for the work of New Hope and other charities as they desperately try to find safe accommodation for all those in need during this crisis. Please if you are able to volunteer safely, then please consider what you can do to help.

But homelessness is only the tip of the iceberg there are many others at risk in our society. The government have made the big decision to close schools except of course for those in particular categories, but what about the many thousand children who are dependent on free school meals or who come from difficult family backgrounds where school is the only safe space they know.

Again, I just wonder if there is more we can do as a church family to help in this crisis. There is much we are learning through this medical crisis and my hope is that by the end we will have the knowhow to create a better more caring society. Actually, we already have the knowhow we are just not very good at putting it into practice. I hope in the end we really will learn to appreciate the work many people do that in normal times often goes unnoticed and with little reward or recognition.

Let us go out of our way to really appreciate the work of the NHS the thousands of workers from doctors to cleaners, to administrators, to scientists and technicians and nurses. So let us hold them in high regard but not only them but those in retail who right now are having such a torrid time.

Let's remember our emergency services and our armed forces and how they are prepared to put themselves at risk for our well being. Those who clean our streets, our refuse collectors. The list goes on. Those such as farmers and fishermen and factory workers who produce our food supply and yes even those who manufacture toilet paper. Let us be generous in our attitude to others as they are to us through their dedicated hard work. As I say I think the coronavirus is presenting us with an opportunity to reassess what is really important and to gain a much more healthy perspective on life.

I hope the government will invest in those areas that we can clearly identify as being vital in creating good communities and a healthy society. But it is not just down to the government it is down to us as individuals and our attitudes and it is a fantastic opportunity for churches to put into practice the values that we already know are important. We have the knowhow, it is there in the pages of the gospels in the teaching of Jesus. We can make this a better world. We just simply need to have the right attitude. What is the right attitude?

A couple of weeks ago I preached on kindness and I said that many of us are attracted to the radical nature of the Gospel. We can at times be disillusioned with the ways of the world.

The empty shelves in our supermarkets is not the only thing that causes dismay.

We know that the teaching of Jesus is revolutionary and in changing our attitudes we can change the world in which we live. The revolution begins with us. I said in my previous sermon if you want to do something amazing then do something that is kind to others. No one person can change the world but we can change the world for one person. Our acts of kindness can make all the difference and not least in our present situation. But don't just show kindness where it is easy. Go out of your way. Make sure your neighbours are ok especially the elderly and those who are most at risk. Show kindness even where it is met with rudeness or ingratitude because if then we break down barriers we change the culture. And coupled with kindness, has to be generosity. We know the verse that says the Lord loves a cheerful giver, but that verse can also be translated the Lord loves a reckless giver.

Are you prepared to throw caution to the wind in this present situation? What are you prepared to give away? If hoarding toilet paper and pasta and who knows what, is wrong, then what is right, and why? The Christian response to wealth is to be generous because God is a generous God. We sometimes mistakenly think that being poor is virtuous. It is not, in fact it is wrong. It is wrong that 1.1 billion people in developing countries have inadequate access to water. No.

God has blessed us generously, lavishing us with love and all manner of good gifts and just as God has blessed us so we must be a blessing to others.

We are attracted to the Gospel that offers an alternative way of living because we are disillusioned by greed and corruption. But what lies behind greed and corruption. Is it not fear and lack trust? The rich young ruler asked Jesus “Good Teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus told him to sell all his possession and give to the poor. The rich young man was unable to do this because he places his trust in his wealth rather than in God. Jesus also told the story of the foolish rich man.

“The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ “Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’ “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

In our reading from St Matthew’s Gospel Jesus says to us

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Attributed I think first to St. Augustine is the story that makes the comparison between heaven and hell and very apt for this present time. The story goes that a man wants to know what heaven and hell are like. He is first taken to hell where much to his surprise there is a large banqueting table heavily laden with as much food as you can possibly imagine and there were many sat at the table, but they were in agony. They were famished because the rules said that you can have as much food as you like but you must eat with a six foot fork holding it at the handle. And of course with a long fork held in such a way it is impossible to feed one’s self.

Rather bemused by what he has seen the man is taken to heaven and much to his surprise there is a very similar table also laden with food and also plenty of people and much to his surprise they have to eat with the same forks and with the same rules. And yet here in heaven the people are full of joy because yes it was impossible to feed yourself with a six foot long fork but it was possible to feed each other, and in doing so everyone could enjoy the banquet.

Come on heaven’s children. Come on brothers and sisters. We know what we must do in this present crisis.

Mahatma Gandhi is quoted as saying “The world has enough for everyone’s need but not enough for everyone’s greed.”

So let’s be really radical and change the world. Let us use this time to build a better society and let the church be a beacon of light and hope in this current crisis. What seems like an enormous challenge, what seems like a really difficult situation could be the catalyst for change the world is crying out for. This could be a really productive time. We who have been so time poor because of the way of the world and the busy lives we live now have time and we can use that time richly to pray, to reflect, to act. We do well to begin by reflecting on our reading for today.

“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

My friends I simply urge you without fuss without making a loud noise but quietly and humbly to consider how you can be kind, how you can be generous to serve the needs of others.

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus teaches us that at the end of time the king will judge and welcome the righteous into his kingdom. ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

We cannot be the servant of two masters we cannot serve both God and money, we have to choose.

Let us be obedient to the command Love your neighbour, and wherever possible to reach out to those in need to be both considerate and generous in all our actions. Together by the grace of God we can get through this.

And maybe we will be stronger for it.