

September 26, 2010

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21c)

Luke 16:19-31

All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare, rector

Wealth

We are living in days when the effects of recession are affecting all of us in one way or another. One family cannot sell their house at a level that allows them to continue their life plan. Another must sell for what feels like peanuts in order to keep the wolf from the door for a little longer. A friend who loses her job in this climate is over 55 and is scared that she might never work again and is wondering how she will live. A man in real estate development and mergers is hurting as the time since the last deal starts stretching into year three and the bills are piling up. Every one of us is doing more with less and everywhere we turn, including here, are asking us to be more generous, give more money than last year, buy more, save more and on it goes.

Do you remember Willy Loman? Willy Loman, the main character of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), was held up to many of us as a failure in the context of postwar prosperity. He wanted nothing more than to be well-liked and saw that as the secret to the good life. Julia Baird is a columnist for *Newsweek* who has pointed out that today we might consider him a success. "Sure, his career was ebbing," she wrote, "but Willy kept a job for 38 years, he owned his house—he had just made the last mortgage payment—and had wife and two children. Today he'd be a survivor."¹ Ms. Baird makes the point that while his children accounted him a failure, his grandchildren today would count him a success. Survival in these anxious days is victory for many among us, and so being reminded that we live in the richest nation on earth and at the same time that one in seven Americans are at or below the poverty line is not helpful on the face of it.

What does a parable about making sure that we are *seeing* the challenges of those around us have to offer that can qualify as something resembling good news? Luke has addressed wealth and poverty from the beginning of the gospel in the *Magnificat, the Song of Mary* in which the mighty are cast down and the lowly raised up. John the Baptist trumpeted the need for justice for the poor. Jesus was run out of town for proclaiming that justice for the poor was finally underway when he preached at his local synagogue. Last week we heard him address the disciples urging a shrewd use of money focused on relationships. Today he addresses the Pharisees on the same topic He takes on their commitment to the Jewish equivalent of a 'prosperity gospel' based in Deuteronomy 28 and

¹ Julia Baird in *Newsweek* September 20, 2010 p.25

elsewhere in which obedience to God will result in blessings at home, at war, in agriculture and in commerce.² 'No', says Luke. Blessings come from doing justice, doing right by our neighbors, seeing them, knowing their names and hearing their stories. So having lots of money is not a sign of God's blessing. That age old popular belief is out. So too is the hope that justice will only be seen in reversal: the belief that both rich and poor will get what is coming to them and what is their due. We all know that there is a certain amount of luck involved in being wealthy, --even if it is only the luck of where we were born. But living in hope that one day our turn will come and that we will suddenly be blessed with an ability to throw a football or have the perfect figure is a pipe dream. That is not justice says St. Luke even if there is an eternal chasm fixed between rich and poor in some life to come. Jesus is not advocating that the inmates should run the asylum or that the poor should run the government. What he wants is that we see, --really *see* each other. What he is after is a world in which our money is used in the service of right relationship and not as a means of avoiding it.

If there is good news for us in the middle of recession while our economy is re-set in ways that will leave many of us with quite changed fortunes, then that good news is found in the assurance that we really are beloved of God and that in that assurance we really can face anything that comes our way. I frequently find myself praying for myself or for others that God will "shine a light on the paths prepared for us to walk in and grant us grace and courage to walk those paths in the assurance that we are loved." This is not a prayer about predestination or fate. It is a prayer that we might see clearly what we are facing and face it with fortitude remembering that love is more important than money, than health or even more important than life itself.

And so our spiritual practice of generosity does not go out of the window in recession. It might have to be re-set along with everything else. We might have to discover what generosity means all over again. Jesus watched a widow put a tiny coin in the collection and praised her because she was generous with all that she had. God's blessing is not so much found in material abundance but in the kind of relationships that are life-giving to all. Survival in these days may well be a victory, but it is an empty victory if it leads us to live pinched and parsimonious lives. I have shared before my own spiritual practice of making a gift whenever I find myself anxious about money and it works to remind me of what really matters. What is your practice in anxious days? Could it be that someone around you needs help and that while it would be lovely if you wrote that person a check, perhaps what you need to be doing is calling and checking in every few days and refusing to be governed by some kind of 'survivor guilt' that makes it difficult for you to be around misfortune. Or perhaps the practice you need is one in which you challenge your own tendency to consider material abundance to be God's blessing on you by working alongside someone who is helping build their own habitat, their own home, giving your time and labor along the way. Making a gift, calling a friend in need, placing ourselves in relation with those who do not know

² Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, (John Knox, 1990) p.188-198

material abundance, --these are all spiritual practices that can help us remember what is of true importance and ultimate worth in life, so helping us to live free in anxious days.

In our customary time of silence try giving thanks for those people who help you remember that you are beloved. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray.