

Arnhem, April 3rd 2025. Midweek Service - Revd Dorienke de Vries

Readings: Isaiah 58.6-9a; Luke 16.10-15

Money cannot buy you happiness. It is a proverb in many languages. True happiness does not lie in possessions and material wealth, but in loving relationships, in a fulfilling job, in trust in God, and things like that.

On the other hand: ask people who actually live in poverty. And there are many of those, even in our own country. People who do not know how to make ends meet. Who work two or three jobs, and take all the unpopular shifts to bring in some extra money. Who no longer open the blue envelopes and all the other scary ones, because they cannot face the financial misery they have ended up in. Tell *them* money can't buy you happiness. Their financial worries deeply affect their family lives, their own emotional and physical well-being and that of their children. Some money to enable them to make a fresh start, would make them very happy indeed.

So what does Jesus actually mean? It is a challenging message, the one that is presented to us today. What Jesus really has an issue with is *greed*. Time and again he brings it up as a core problem in the relationship between God and human beings. In our reading he presents it as a radical choice between two gods. You cannot serve God and money. It is either the one or the other.

We only have to look at the response of the Pharisees to realize how challenging it is. 'The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard this and they ridiculed him.' If you do not want to hear the truth about yourself, you just make fun of the person who is confronting you with it. If you are still too decent to shoot the messenger, you make them look ridiculous, to distract yourself and others from the unsavoury truth: that you are addicted to your possessions.

But why is serving the god of money so attractive? What is it that makes money such a pitfall for most human beings? Human beings tend to make short term choices. It is difficult for us to choose a path that leads to something good in the future, but brings hardship and scarcity now. Money and wealth promise immediate gratification of our wishes and desires. It makes it possible for us to want it all and to have it now. Compare that to the difficult things God is asking from us: to forgive; to love our enemies, to share what we have with those who have nothing. Or in the words of Isaiah that we have just read: to share our bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into our house; when we see the naked, to cover them, and not hiding ourselves from our own kin.

It is a lifestyle of serving the needs of others, not our own. Something that we have to learn, something that doesn't always come naturally to us.

It is not sinful to be rich. Having no financial worries is a blessing. However, there were two serious issues with the wealth of the Pharisees and the rest of the religious elite in Israel. Firstly, their wealth was a result of injustice; a result of the harsh taxes and other ways they had found of bleeding people dry. And secondly: they kept all that money for themselves. They did nothing to help the poor, the widow, the orphan. Social conditions in first century Israel were truly appalling, while the treasury of the temple was bursting at the seams. The temple worship looked nice and impressive. But the true worship, the worship in spirit and in truth, was suffering badly. The temple buildings would fill people with awe. But the law of the Lord was disregarded and neglected.

True worship, says the apostle St. James, is to care for orphans and widows in their distress. He must have read the words from Isaiah, like we did!

It is impossible to serve God and money. We cannot say that we belong to God, but that our money is our own. If we belong to God, everything we are and everything we have belongs to him. And it is for him to lay down the rules for how we serve him.

It is impossible to serve God and money. But of course it is possible to serve God *with* our money. It doesn't matter whether we have a nice nest egg in the bank, or whether we have to be really careful in our spending choices. Ultimately, our purses and wallets and bank accounts belong to God as much as our hearts do. And a heart that belongs to him, will be a generous heart. It will know the joy of giving, the joy of sharing, the joy of helping. Even if it is only one person, even if it only one good cause, even if it is only occasionally, because we can't afford it the whole time, even if.... Even small acts of generosity can have a great impact.

So let us be faithful in the small ways that we are capable of. Faithful with the little that has been entrusted to us. We can't take it with us anyway; it is not really ours. But how we use the things of the earth will decide what we will receive in heaven. The things of the earth are temporary. But the reward we will have in heaven will be ours for all eternity.

May we know the true wealth. Wealth that consists not in what we keep, but in what we give away.

Amen.