**Money, a thing of the past**

*Amos 8:4-7, Luke 16:1-9*

*21st September 2025*

 A friend of mine was given some nice chocolates, which she accepted with great enthusiasm saying: ‘Thank you! ’I can’t eat them now but once Lent is over, I won’t half enjoy them! I’ll keep them until then’. Well, this sounds quite trivial, doesn’t it in comparison with what the prophet Amos is talking about in our first reading? It is nothing like grinding the poor and suppressing the humble and resenting the day of rest because of the loss of dishonest profits. And, of course, I am not saying that it is wrong to give up things for Lent. I understand that some of us find it beneficial to deny ourselves our favourite food or favourite pastime for awhile as a spiritual exercise. But, in a small way it illustrates what the prophet is getting at when he questions the benefit of the exercise without the accompanying spirituality behind it.

 Now, we don’t know very much about the prophet Amos. He may turn up a couple of times a year amongst the Lectionary readings, but on the whole we don’t hear many sermons on this so-called ‘minor prophet’. It is true, the whole book consists of a mere 9 chapters as opposed to the mighty 66 chapters of Isaiah, or the 52 chapters of Jeremiah, but in fact his significance as a prophet, and a ‘writing prophet’ at that, far outweighs the size of his book. According to some scholarly opinion he was an innovator in his field and a model that was followed by other prophets, as he showed them the way how criticize their society in the public arena.

It was his background that gave him his unique voice and unique view point. He didn’t come from religious circles, or priestly or prophetic families. He was a simple sheep farmer from a place called Tekoa in Judah, during the 8th century BC. It was there that he received his call to speak out against the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He upped and went and duly did it and did it so effectively that soon the ripples of his preaching reached the courts of the High Priest and the King. After this his days as a prophet there came abruptly to an end, he was unceremoniously thrown out of the Kingdom and sent back to Judah. But not before he fearlessly denounced the King into his face and foretold the demise of the whole Kingdom of Israel. As we now know his prophecy came to be fulfilled and the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell prey to the Assyrian invasion and disappeared in the ensuing years.

But the curious thing was that when Amos stood up with his devastating criticisms there was no sign of any of this. Israel was enjoying a relatively peaceful and prosperous period in its history even expanding its territories. There was no reason to worry about the future. It took someone, like this uneducated, uncultured peasant farmer, who almost counted as a foreigner coming from the South, to recognise what the price of all this prosperity was. The wealth that was created was at the expense of the poor and the ruthless exploitation of the most vulnerable parts of society. Amos knew something about this, as he was on the receiving end of it himself. And though he didn’t even think of himself as a prophet, he was able to hear in his heart the voice of God, which echoed God’s own character: justice and mercy for the oppressed, the poor, the widow the orphan and the foreigner.

These words were clearly upsetting to those who benefitted from the prosperity. They are always upsetting to those who benefit from prosperity. Most societies, even our churches work on a kind of top-to-bottom line, it is almost impossible for those at the bottom to be heard, yet they are the ones who are bearing the brunt of burdens. Hence the significance of the voice of someone like Amos. Our own society also knows a thing or two about inequalities. According to the latest statistical data the top 10% of households in Britain today are holding more than 50% of the nation’s wealth, while the bottom 50% holds less than 5%. And in spite of all the technological developments the gap is not narrowing but growing. Do we as Christian churches use our voices to speak up effectively for the oppressed, the poor, the widow the orphan and the foreigner?

Well, - as far as we know – Jesus was not a householder, neither was he wealthy, but he seems very aware of life’s everyday necessities and their financial implications. He knows about the widow’s mite, the curse of unemployment, the unexpected visitors dropping in when the cupboards are empty, the everyday worries about how people can feed themselves and clothe themselves; And of course, the chain of unscrupulous landlords and dishonest managers as they appear in our Gospel reading.

And although it is clear where his sympathies lie yet he is not starry-eyed about the characters he is using in his parables, he is not idolising them just because they are at the bottom of society. In fact, most of his characters are flawed in one way or another, which makes life difficult for his interpreters, who would like some clear-cut, black-and-white explanations of his sometimes enigmatic parables. It’s so much easier, isn’t if we are told who is representing whom in a parable? But Jesus’ parables don’t seem to work that way and certainly not in this case.

Neither of the two main characters of this story we heard from Luke’s Gospel, are the best examples to be followed. The rich man seems to have no idea what his steward is doing, he has to rely on hearsay and he acts on it ruthlessly. The steward is cooking the books and when called to task he aggravates matters by further dishonesty as he encourages the short-changing of his master by the tenant farmers under his jurisdiction. And to top it all, the master then applauds the steward for acting so astutely. Apart from the fact that, even with some accountancy experience, it’s difficult to follow the logic of the story, one is left with the question, what is the moral of this parable?

Well, it is not for nothing that this is regarded as one the most difficult of Jesus’ parables, which exercised the minds of endless speculations and interpretations down the Christian centuries. But I am not going to join them to second-guess what may have been in Jesus’ mind when he told this parable. Did he have some individuals in mind, or was he criticizing the whole system, that produced all this roguery? Instead, let me just give you a few observations with the view that you too will give them some thought and weigh them up to see if they have any merit.

The first one is that – as we said before – parables, especially challenge parables as this is, were not told to give people instructions of how to act. More often than not they reflected how things were, good and bad and warts and all. Jesus’ audience grew up with the teachings and appreciation of the Law, which did tell them what to do. Part of Jesus’ innovation was that his stories were meant to make people think and look into their own hearts; it challenged them to freely discuss how they felt about the characters and their actions, and come to their own conclusion. They were interactive – in today’s parlance – They were not finished by the telling, they counted on the ensuing debates and discussions.

The second one is that the dishonest steward was not complemented by his master on his dishonesty, but on his astuteness, or worldly wisdom. After all he just wanted to secure his future in the long run having messed up his current situation. He didn’t get bogged down by his failure, but in his twisted kind of way he was trying to find a way out of it with an eye on life after the failure. And there may be a lesson in this for us too. There is life beyond our failures, even after the greatest ones. That’s what our faith is all about. That’s what this table is all about. We remember the death but we believe in and give thanks for the resurrection that follows.

 And the third one is that in this crisis point of his life the dishonest steward discovered he got his priorities wrong. Looking to the future he was driven to realize his need of those to whom presumably he had never given a second thought before. His motive may have been crooked, but his conclusion was spot on: there comes a time - as Jesus said - when wealth and money becomes a thing of the past, but relationships endure. The steward looked to human relationships, but Jesus was showing the way toward an even bigger picture with a greater, more enduring relationship with God. I pray that this relationship may be ours, that it may sustain us through all

the ups and downs of life and give us hope for the future.

*Erna Stevenson*