Cathedral 290913

Amos 6: 1a-7; 1 Timothy 6: 6-19; Luke 16: 19-31

The new Perth and Kinross Food Bank was launched last week. That’s a great thing – bringing together statutory and voluntary sectors with the supermarkets and others to respond to human need. At the same time it is an indictment of a society like ours that such a thing should be necessary. As a response, it meets need but doesn’t solve problems. It provides food but doesn’t challenge us to ask what is wrong with a society in which people cannot feed their families.

Today’s readings are all about wealth and its spiritual and moral danger. I’m rich. I don’t feel rich but I am rich. And I can prove it. On the Global Rich List website, I am in the top 0.15% of the world population. I’m sure you don’t feel rich either – but in relative terms you are. I’ve worked in areas of deep social and economic deprivation. I’ve seen poverty in Glasgow and in America. I’ve walked the streets of Calcutta and Kampala. I’ve never seen starvation. But I’ve seen teeming populations of people with nothing.

So woe to us who lie on beds of ivory and lounge on our couches – as Amos says. Paul writing to Timothy says, ‘You can’t take it with you when you go’ and the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil’ And hear the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus – of which the message simply is ‘It’s too late now to make amends for past injustice’

Baptism takes place in public worship today partly because it is we of the community of faith who receive the new member into our fellowship. It also reminds us that to be a disciple is to embrace a commitment to a particular way of life. It’s a way of life in which, as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, it is the poor and not the rich who are blessed.

Wealth is not necessarily bad in itself. When I worked in Northern Ireland I believed that prosperity was one of the changes which would bring peace. Prosperity increases opportunity in education and employment; prosperity can change the status of women; as happened in the Irish Republic prosperity leads to dramatic reductions in family size. Prosperity can lead people away from the need to refight the lost battles of a bad history because it gives them other things to hope and strive for.

The question is, ‘What kind of prosperity and used for what purpose?’ We look for what they used to call the green shoots of recovery – the beginning of a new prosperity – a rise in house prices – careless of the needs of young couples who are trying to buy their first house. In spite of the evidence, we don’t address the parallel story of global warming which is disproportionately created by the developed and rich world and bears disproportionately on the vulnerable and impoverished people of the developing world.

Let’s go back to the rich man and Lazarus and think for a moment about what the story says. The great chasm or gulf fixed between them did not arise on their death or at the last judgement. It was created by the selfish indifference of the rich man while they lived. I don’t think that chasm is just a personal thing – because the way life works is that the rich have the ability to order society, to shape patterns of trade, to control access to advancement in ways which suit them and which create traps of poverty.

Maybe that should make us who are rich afraid – maybe it should put the fear of God into us. Fear causes us to retreat, to protect – and it paralyses. The fear of God should motivate and empower us – empower us to bridge the chasms and prepare the way of the Lord.

At the heart of this, we are being challenged not to judge or value people in terms of economics. Nobody should be let in for our convenience or our perception of their usefulness – and then shut out when we have no further need of them. If the economic collapse of 2008 teaches us anything, it should warn us of the dangers of unregulated greed.

To come back to the baptism in which we are about to share – the community of the disciples of Jesus Christ is a new kind of community – drawn together by the Holy Spirit who makes us one. Our value to one another is based on the value which we have as the undeserving and adopted children of God – and that value has nothing to do with wealth or any of the other measurements which we use to measure others off against ourselves and so to create chasms and gulfs. Our value is our value as children of God and made in his image and likeness.