

Sermon for October 13 2024
Proper 23B
21st Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Amos 5:6-7,10-15
Psalm 90:12-17
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

In the reading from the Prophet Amos we hear:

Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood,
and bring righteousness to the ground! ...
For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins—
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate.

And from the Gospel of Mark, we hear the plea from a rich young man:

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”
“Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor,
and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”
When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving,
for he had many possessions.

Jesus and Amos seem to be telling us that being rich is bad and being poor is good.

The Prophet Amos is writing around the year 750 B.C.
He was the earliest of the twelve minor prophets in the Hebrew scriptures,
and the only prophet from the South sent by God to prophesy to the North.

A short explanation: Israel, the whole nation, was made up of two kingdoms.
The northern kingdom, also called Israel, was comprised of ten of the twelve tribes; and the southern kingdom,
called Judah contained the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

Scholar Abraham Heschel describes the situation:

“The Northern Kingdom, also called the Kingdom of Israel, reached the summit of its material power and prosperity. ... When Amos appeared in the North there was pride, plenty, and splendor in the land, elegance in the cities, ... The rich had their summer and winter palaces adorned with costly ivory, gorgeous couches with damask pillows, on which they reclined at sumptuous feasts. They planted pleasant vineyards, anointed themselves with precious oils; their women ... were addicted to wine. At the same time there was no justice in

the land, the poor were afflicted, exploited, even sold into slavery, and the judges were corrupt. In the midst of this atmosphere arose Amos...”¹

And Amos warns them:

Seek the LORD and live,
or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire,
and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it.

[The house of Joseph refers to the kingdom of Israel,
and Bethel was the cultic center of worship for the ten northern tribes.]

It's not as if Amos is telling them something new.

The prophet was reminding them of their obligations, which were:

Care for the sick and the widows and orphans, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, make welcome the stranger in the land.

Often duties were done through the paternalistic system of the Middle East:
those who were well off were considered “blessed” by God,
and the blessings of being well off were to be passed on to those less fortunate.

As it says in the Gospel of Luke (12:48)

“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required;
and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.”

This sense of obligation was codified in the medieval concept
of the Great Chain of Being that delineated a hierarchy of God at the top
followed by Angels then Humanity and then animals and plants...

The Human section was further delineated in order of what we'd now call class.

The 19th Century French term *La noblesse oblige* encapsulates the idea
that those who have been given wealth, power, prestige and privilege
are obligated to the service of those less fortunate.

The belief system dates back beyond Plato and Aristotle.

It was a part of the heritage of the Hebrews passed down from Abraham and Moses. In Jesus' time folks
continued to believe:

those with wealth, power, prestige and privilege were blessed by God.

So Amos prophesies that because they have not lived up to their obligations:

Therefore, because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

But, with God, there is the possibility of repentance:

¹ *The Prophets An Introduction* by Abraham J. Heschel, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1962: pp. 27-28.

Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you ...
Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Unfortunately for the people of the Northern Kingdom,
they do not change their ways, and in 722 BC the Assyrian army sweeps down
and scatters the ten tribes of Israel to the four winds,
and the Northern Kingdom is no more.
So, what of the rich young man?

“Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!
It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle
than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

The disciples were greatly astounded and said to one another,
“Then who can be saved?”

Why were the disciples astounded?

They are astounded because the rich were believed to be blessed and closer to God because they were rich and obviously blessed by God.

They are astounded because they'd always believed the rich would be saved,
and if the rich aren't bound for glory, what hope is there for the rest of us.

These are uncomfortable thoughts.

How often are we told Jesus has a preference for the poor?

You see, that's the problem for us: WE are ALL rich.

Compared to the much of the rest of the world even the poorest of us is well off. But, I assert, being rich is not the problem.

The judgment falls on those who are rich,
but who do not care about anybody but themselves.

Wealth is not the issue. Rather it is what one does with one's wealth.

The rich young man in our gospel reading today came to Jesus,
evidently feeling his salvation was in all that he had, not in all that he was.

At the end of the day, says Hebrews, and Jesus,
it is who you are that matters more than what you have.

I remember my first two years after moving to Santa Fe from Indiana.

I'd been hired as news editor of the New Mexican,
which was owned by the Gannett corporation.

My wife and I joined St. Bede's Episcopal Church and I'd been elected to the Vestry. When Gannett was losing the paper in a contract dispute, I lost my job.

After I got over the shock, I went to the rector and asked

Should I resign from the vestry because I was no longer employed.
“No, of course not” was her response.
I considered my value as a member of the church on what I did for a living
and not who I was as a person. That was not her evaluation of my worth.

Our value is not based on what we have.
The joke about whoever has the most toys when they die wins –
is just that – a joke,
and that’s part of the issue surrounding the story of the rich young man.

What was he asked, remember?
“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

He’s actually not asking about salvation; he’s asking to inherit God’s goodness:
“to become possessed here and now through participation in God’s eternal being” ... in the belief that
humanity’s true life lies in a timeless world
in which we “are freed from the impediments of material and temporal existence.”²

Jesus said to them again,
“Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!
It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle
than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”
The disciples were greatly astounded and said to one another,
“Then who can be saved?”
Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God;
for God all things are possible.”

This is who we are; this is our worth.
We are children in relationship with the most high God,
redeemed by the sacrifice of an itinerant rabbi
who asked a rich young man to do
what that same rabbi asks of me and of you

“– Come, follow me.”

² *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* edited by F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone; Oxford University Press, 1997; p. 564.