

## **SERMON FOR TRINITY 15 | 25.09.2022**

Amos 8: 4-7; I Timothy 2: 1-7; St Luke 16: 1-13

**It's been uncanny recently how the choice of Sunday readings has had a direct link with what was going on in the world right now. Last week, with Prince Charles taking over as our new King we had St Paul telling us to pray for our kings and rulers. This week we have a lesson in economics at just the same time as the new Chancellor's mini budget has put the cat among the pigeons in households and financial markets up and down the country. If the message last week suggested that perhaps 'soft power' was often the way God chooses to build his kingdom, then the announcements from the Treasury this week seem to be challenging us to think pretty hard about our neighbours.**

**But before we tackle the Gospel story of the poor man sitting at the gate of his rich neighbour – and try to make some sense of the changes that Kwasi Kwarteng has announced - I want to ask a more general question: about what we notice.**

**One of the stories coming out after the Queen's death concerned a phone call Mrs Thatcher apparently made to the Palace before she went for her regular weekly meeting. *What colour is the Queen wearing today; I don't want to clash* Mrs T is reported to have asked. *O don't worry*, came the reply from an official; *her Majesty never notices what other people are wearing...***

**While I don't believe a word of it, it did make me think about what I notice and what passes me by. Whether it is the expression on people's faces, the amount of rubbish in the street, Prince Charles' habit of fiddling with his cufflinks – or indeed what other people are wearing – we are very different in what attracts our attention, what interests us, what excites us indeed - and what on the other hand annoys us. I, personally, would be a hopeless police witness as I never notice what people are wearing – but on the other hand, at least when I could see, a stray full stop in a piece of text screams out at me... !**

**So when Jesus tells the story about Lazarus, full of sores, looking enviously up at the dinner table of the wealthy Dives, my first thought is that I suspect Dives had simply screened Lazarus out of his field of vision. He never gave him a second thought. And I say that because, living here in London, most of us are doing the same.**

**Of course people tell us about the poverty that exists on our doorsteps; about the use of Foodbanks; about the disgusting housing conditions that many endure; about the difficulties that those on disability benefits face. But, by and large, do we notice these things unless we happen to meet someone in that situation or stumble over a sleeping bag underneath the overhang of the RBS building at the Angel late at night? The Tribune this week had a feature on Dee who was not only a familiar figure outside Sainsburys but also at the Vicarage over the years, nearly always looking for money. Sadly she was discovered to have died this week and a total stranger has set up a crowd-funding appeal to make sure she has a decent funeral. But why hadn't I asked myself why she wasn't around so much these days?**

**Economics is not, of course, just about how to balance the national budget: it is about the choices that will affect every single one of us every single day. From the level of welfare benefits to the quality of schools and hospitals, the size of our international aid budget to the potholes in the road or the availability of a dentist, someone, somewhere, is making an economic choice. But even if we not economic experts, we all think we have an instinct for what is fair - and an expectation that certain standards will apply.**

**So when we read that the mini Budget is taking a diametrically different line from that which we have grown up with over the last 40years, we are bound to sit up and ask what is the underlying principle behind the changes. And it would seem that the new understanding is that, in order for our economy to grow, those with higher incomes need to be encouraged - by tax cuts - to invest more so that the benefits 'trickle down' to the rest of society. More investment, more jobs, more wealth for us all.**

**But the evidence for this is simply not there: after the cap on bonuses was introduced, top salaries quickly rose to compensate! And even if that had not been the case, the headline figures that we ordinary mortals can grasp are leading people to ask whether these changes really are fair? How can it be right that the money in the pocket of a millionaire will increase by over £50,000 while a single person, earning just £20,000 a year, will be better off by just £218? More worrying, is it not true that a government having to borrow huge sums at a time of increased interest rates may also find it more difficult to invest in schools and social care programmes, railways and in the urgent need to combat the housing crisis?**

**And yet the mantra remains: we have to do something about growth: we are stagnating as a nation and are not getting richer - as we would expect would happen. We need to stimulate investment for that to happen.**

**But do we - actually - need to endlessly increase the size of the cake, or should we not begin to see how to divide the cake more evenly? Jesus' story is challenging because no sooner has the disparity of income between Lazarus and Dives been revealed, than both of them die. And the despair of the rich man in pain stems from his realisation that he'd had plenty of chances to do something to alleviate Lazarus' miserable existence – but had refused to do anything about it. He hadn't noticed and he hadn't cared. And he is in torment as a result.**

**Then, knowing that he cannot extricate himself from his punishment and in his despair, he pleads for someone to go and warn his brothers. But Jesus is blunt about that situation too: these brothers are not likely to take any more notice than Dives, even if someone should rise from the dead. And of course Jesus is right: Jesus has risen from the dead and he has shown us our overriding obligation to care for the poor. And no, by and large, we don't take any notice.**

**President Biden has put it as clearly as he can: trickle-down economics don't work. It didn't work in the UK in the 1970s under Ted Heath and it won't work now. There can be no alternative than for the wealthy to sit up and to notice the poor man at the gate. And having done that to see that the way we divide the national cake will have to prioritise those at the bottom of the pile for whom this winter is going to be very tough indeed. I am not the only one to be very anxious about this current economic gamble.**

**But the spiritual life always comes down to the same issue: how much do I really care about those around me? Do I feel some sympathy for Mrs Alexander and her lines from *All Things bright and beautiful*. Because the onus on us is not to ask - *do these people deserve my help* but, *what help do they need?* Whether they deserve help is God's business not ours; in the same way as he gives us more than we deserve. As Jesus shows in the second chapter of St Mark's Gospel which many of us are reading at the moment, there are always reasons not to help people – whether it is keeping the Sabbath or something else. But God isn't fooled: giving to those in need has to be part of our regular DNA. And we start by noticing what's there.**