

St Giles' Church, Bramhope

Sunday 29 September 2019 (14th after Trinity)

Sermon: Peter Vickers

Epistle: 1 Timothy 6: 3-19

Gospel: Luke 16: 19-31

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be always acceptable to you; Amen

Text: **"Godliness with contentment is great gain."** (1 Tim 6:6)

For those who don't know me, I'm Peter Vickers, a son and a father, a brother and a widower, resident of Bramhope on and off for 60 years, and chairman of an almost 200-year-old, family-owned, specialty lubricating oil manufacturer in Leeds.

And – in absolute terms, and in the eyes of most of the world's 8 billion other people - I'm rich. So these texts are **personal!**

At the literal level, these texts remind us – we, comfortable in Bramhope - of our obligation to our neighbours: the endangered, the homeless, the hungry, the orphans, the abandoned, the oppressed, the illiterate, the sick, the poor. The danger that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus warns against is not so much wealth itself, but our **indifference**.

The rich man is condemned not for what he did, but rather for what he **did not** do.

In 1933, my grandfather, a good Methodist who attended chapel twice on a Sunday and ran the local battalion of the Boys' Brigade, was challenged to take time in silent prayer to seek God's guidance in the depth of his heart. Expecting perhaps a divine revelation, he was surprised by the rather banal thought that he should go into our factory with his eyes open, as if he were a stranger.

So he went: and somehow his heart was opened and he observed the actual working conditions of our employees: only a single cold water tap for them to wash under at the end of the day; no canteen, no sick pay, little paid holiday. But as the owner manager he got all these, of course.

He was not a bad employer by the standards of the time – these conditions were normal. But he realised that, whilst they might be *legally* right, they were not *morally* right; and that they must be changed.

So, in the midst of the Great Depression, he built new washing and canteen facilities, introduced holiday pay and sickness benefits, persuaded his sibling shareholders to give some capital to create an employee benefit trust, and from then on ran the business on the basis that people are more important than figures.

Although the economic and social context has changed, thank God, we still operate on that same basis - that people matter; so, for example, we have an annual profit-sharing bonus scheme that reflects the whole company's performance, not rewarding individuals who achieve their own targets.

We can use wealth as a buffer, as an insulation against the misfortune which seems to afflict others. Wealth and success can make us indifferent and even arrogant. I wonder if that thought from my grandfather's inner voice – "go into the factory with your eyes open" – pierced **first** his **indifference**.

But there's another, perhaps deeper, level and lesson too from these readings. And it is even more important, for it offers an alternative route, a different way of thinking.

In his letter to Timothy, alone and hard pressed in Ephesus, where some people were teaching false doctrines, Paul lays straight into the fake news of the prosperity gospel, the pernicious idea that living a good life will lead to material success. This is a modern heresy. But it also rests on a very old, very flawed, assumption: remember that Jesus had to explain to his disciples that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. "Who then can be saved?" the disciples asked in bewilderment. They too had thought that wealth was a sign of divine blessing.

But **Paul** is quite clear about it: he denounces those who "think that godliness is a means to financial gain". Paul goes on to warn Timothy that it is the DESIRE to be rich, and the LOVE of money, that are snares and temptations, the root of all kinds of evil.

I've noticed that greed is exponential: the more I have, the more I want. Perhaps you recognise that, too? There's a story that the capitalist, John D Rockefeller, was asked "Mr Rockefeller, how much money is enough?" Allegedly he replied "Just a little more...". Just a little more. That's it, isn't it?

Usefully, Paul doesn't leave us just denounced. Rather, he offers Timothy and all of us both a different goal, and a different way to reach it.

The new goal? "Godliness with contentment is great gain".

Interestingly, when I told our factory manager, Scott, that I'd been asked to preach and that the texts were about the love of money, he immediately said "we should aim for contentment, not wealth". Now Scott, who grew up in the rough end of Hunslet, is not a professing Christian; but he does have both a profound moral sense and also a deep compassion for other people. And it seems to me that, if two men as different in time and background as St Paul and Scott, could come up with the same word – "contentment" – it's probably worth taking seriously....

And the way to reach this contentment? Paul urges Timothy, and us, to "flee" from the love of money and instead to "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness."

"Flee". It's a strong word. How can we "flee" from the love of money, from the desire to be rich?

I think we are called to **let go** of them – to consciously, deliberately, **let go** and **stop pursuing the love of money and the desire to be rich** (or, indeed, whatever else really drives us: the longing for a relationship? A lust for power? Ambition for our family?)

Letting go is much easier said than done. But I've begun to learn what it means, in all sorts of areas, to "love; let go; let God; and go on".

Maybe this process can be the antidote not merely to our pursuits and desires, but also to our **indifference**, too - for one cannot both truly love, and also be indifferent; it's one or the other!

It has certainly been my own experience in the last 4 years, since my wife's death, that to "love; let go; let God; and go on" is the way both to contentment, and to a transformed inner life and spiritual journey.

Perhaps we might all pray, and take time in silence to consider: what situation we need to look at with fresh eyes; where we need to let our indifference be pierced; and of what we may be called to let go.