

**2019-09-29 Barbara Mitchell**

**Trinity 15 - 1 Timothy 6:6-19 and Luke 16:19-end**

The number of weddings happening in churches is in decline – wedding venues want to sell the whole package, so only the most committed feel strong enough to buck the trend and get married in a religious ceremony. But those who do generally want a choir – not just to look pretty in the photos, or to enhance the singing, but to provide the music as so few of the congregation are likely to join in with the chosen hymns. Like church weddings hymn singing, it seems, is going out of fashion. There are only a handful that people seem to know – and these are usually ones they sang at primary school. So today instead of ‘The voice that breathed o’er Eden’ or ‘Love Divine, all loves excelling’, wedding hymns are usually ‘One More Step Along the World I Go’, ‘Give Me Oil in My Lamp’, or the number one choice, ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’.

The happy couple usually just hand their choice of hymn over to the person printing the order of service and those firms seem to only have access to the original edition of Hymns Ancient and Modern. Consequently, I often find

myself singing these immortal words, as penned in 1848 by Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander, wife of the Archbishop of Armagh:

The rich man in his castle,  
the poor man at his gate,  
God made them high and lowly  
And ordered their estate.

It is said that this verse was inspired by a visit to the Somerset village of Dunster, with its magnificent castle standing proud over the ancient yarn market, so I found myself merrily singing this verse as I walked up Dunster High Street during a recent holiday!

Today these words are considered an endorsement of a class conscious society and non-PC in a world which espouses social mobility, so, apart from, it would seem, at weddings they are not normally sung in church services. But perhaps they would have been very apposite today with our reading from the Gospel of Luke. This is exactly the situation described by Jesus in the parable we have heard. The rich man was very much in his castle, enjoying all the luxuries that went with his status, while at his gate lay an ex-leper (the name Lazarus implies someone who

has had such a skin condition, but he would not have been allowed back into society in any way if he was still unwell). Such a person would have lost his property while he was in a leper colony and would be unlikely to be able to find employment – just like the character played by Michael Palin in *The Life of Brian*! No wonder he had to lay at the gate of a wealthy person in the hope of receiving charitable gifts of food.

But, unlike Mrs Alexander, Jesus was not just telling this story to describe the status quo of Victorian society. He was using it to point out the false premise of belief of many of his fellow Jews. The belief in life after death was relatively new to Jews in the first century AD. In the Jewish Scriptures the image we get of what happens after death was akin to the ancient Greek myths about Hades – everyone went to a place called Sheol underground where they lived a shadowy existence parallel to the one they had lived on earth. There was no judgement or separation of people into heaven or hell – any reward you got from God for moral behaviour you received in the form of material goods in this life and vice versa if you had been wicked. No wonder so many of the Psalms in the Bible have anguished lines such as “Why do the

wicked prosper?” There seemed to be no answer to this conundrum – although the writer of the Book of Job does try to give us a solution!

The idea of reward and punishment after death had begun in Judaism about 200 years before the time of Jesus, when young observant Jewish people were dying in defence of their faith during the Maccabean uprising against the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes. They were clearly not getting their reward in this life and so the belief in judgement after death and resurrection began to gradually develop. But it was not accepted by all Jews – and the Sadducees, the wealthy priests, were those who most strongly rejected such new-fangled ideas. It is those men Jesus is criticising in this story – and his original audience, the working class of Galilee would have known that!

It is easy to have a simplistic picture of religious life in first century Judaism – everyone unswervingly keeping an ancient law code. That didn’t work well, so Jesus came along with new ideas, taught people to forget the laws and just love one another instead and Christianity was born! But there were other Jews at this time who were

equally critical of the behaviour of their leaders, those men who were born into a priestly family who could therefore enjoy the wealth and prestige that came from offering sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple simply because they came from the right pedigree. No wonder, then, that parables like this and the Good Samaritan, where a badly injured man is ignored by a Priest and a Levite on their way to the Temple, were remembered so clearly by their original hearers! Such men, like the rich man in this parable, would have been dumbfounded to wake up one morning to find themselves in Gehenna, aka Hell, while the unfortunate beggar at their gate, whom they had been assiduously avoiding so as not to undermine the man's just punishment from God, had been assigned to heaven.

The early Christians would have been very aware of the corruption which can come with wealth, not just because of the teachings of Jesus, but also because of what they had observed in their own society with a great gulf between the leaders, who lived in luxury, and the poor tenant farmers who could barely scrape a living on the dry, stony hills of Israel. No wonder, then, that the author of the letter to Timothy chose to give the new church

advice on how to deal with this thorny issue. The rich man in the parable lacked generosity and this is a trap that the readers of 1 Timothy were told to avoid. There is nothing wrong with money and the good things it can provide, but sharing those goods can make our own pleasure much greater.

Some years ago I watched a programme where Lottery winners talked about the effect their win had had on their lives. Most felt it had been awful – they had spent money on luxuries and enjoyed material goods and experiences they had not dreamed possible before, but in the process human relationships had broken down and they no longer knew who their true friends were. It was doom, gloom and misery, despite the millions of pounds they had won.

Then a couple were interviewed who were positively glowing with happiness. Their story was so different – they had been able to retire early – in their late 50s – but they had stayed in their modest home because they had such good neighbours and they had helped their children get on the property ladder. Then they provided equipment which the hospital in Sheffield where the wife had worked was fundraising for. And every Christmas

they paid for a coach full of disadvantaged children from the local area to go to a pantomime. They both said that sharing the happiness of the children on that outing each year was worth far more to them than luxury cars or expensive cruises. It truly was for that couple the treasure of a good foundation for the future that we are all exhorted to desire in 1 Timothy!

So, perhaps the rich man in his castle would have also have felt that same happiness and fulfilment if he had taken the trouble to step outside his gate to get to know Lazarus and share some of his largesse with him. And so can we when we show love to our neighbours by giving to the Poverty and Hope Appeal, bringing our offerings to the Harvest Thanksgiving next week, supporting all the work at All Saints New Cross or contributing to our local foodbank. Small things, but a sign of our care for others.