

Sermon

Timothy 6.6-19

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

11 But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen.

17 As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Luke 16.19-end

19 'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." ²⁵But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." ²⁷He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." ²⁹Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." ³⁰He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." ³¹He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." '

I have become an expert on something...

It is jolly useful – has been an amazing skill as a parent, teacher – dare I admit even as a priest ...

What is my amazing skill you might wonder... ?

My skill is that I am rather good at ignoring what I don't want to know or I don't want to face.

As a parent for example – I have found my selective vision and selective hearing has gifted me many quiet evenings – is it really worth stopping your child from reading under the bedcovers as long as they have enough sleep not to be really grumpy the next day? Is it really worth listening attentively to a grumpy child who only wants chocolate biscuits for breakfast?

I have found in life - that a healthy ignoring of the many things I am told I should be doing – chief of these are reading emails and newsletters sent from the many diocesan offices – means I have more time and energy for ministry.

I made the mistake of admitting this coping strategy to the archdeacon and clergy chapter this week.

Surprisingly – despite my obvious attempt at being a rebel - I found that admitting that I employ these ignoring skills went down well – especially amongst our neighbouring clergy who have been having a particularly challenging time recently.

I could go on for ages about the benefits of honing our ignoring skills – perhaps reframing it a bit might make it sound a bit more palatable – let's call it - the benefits of focussing on what is really important - however - there is a shadow side to ignoring – as it can also be hugely selfish and stop us from doing the right thing or being kind and fair to those we are responsible for or live amongst.

Ignoring is a skill to be used with care and wisdom...

Ignoring is a major theme in our Gospel reading – perhaps the biggest ignoring is actually us who listen – the story is simply too powerful – the message too big for us – so we ignore what feels too big – my question for us today though is – are we actually focussing on the most important things?

Ok – let us look at our Gospel reading together...

So Jesus tells us another story - a totally brilliant but completely awkward and cringey story ...

As always – let's understand the context – you may remember from last week that Jesus is basically going round to the clergy chapters and Diocesan Conferences of his day and telling all the religious leaders that they need to stop focussing on money and invite the outsiders to their dinner tables instead. Essentially Jesus has been seriously winding up the Pharisees and Scribes with his Good news of radical love.

The story Jesus tells us is about a rich man and a poor man – bring it to the present day – maybe think about the head of one of our biggest energy companies – who is earning mega millions and then some – and then think of the many or maybe someone in our community today without money for basics – having to make difficult decisions – food or warmth / time with children or work?

So we have our two leading players – the mega rich and someone in desperate need.

In the story Jesus tells us – the rich man and the poor man both die - and we see a reversal of fortune in the afterlife – the rich man is outside of heaven and in desperate need and the poor man is with Abraham. An interesting character in the story is Abraham.. The religious folk Jesus was winding up would have known that Abraham was wealthy – we know this from our Hebrew Scriptures – I expect the reason Jesus brings Abraham into the mix is that Abraham being a wealthy man and blessed by God was an excuse for the holding onto wealth which came with a sense of entitlement and a feeling of greater value for some compared to others. Interesting then that Abraham is on the poor man's side – literally – and even more than that – Abraham is arguing with the rich man on behalf of the poor man! Abraham was wealthy - but - his wealth was shared – we simply want to ignore the sharing bits...

Surely - it is one of those let's not take the Bible too literally moments for most Christians because the reality – is just not what we want to hear or do. Is it? Share your wealth – don't focus on wealth – of course we want to selective ignore what we don't want to know or face up to. This story – is so awkward back then and right now – because we know that wealth is to be shared and yet we want to keep it all and be told that's ok really ...

One way round this for those who (*generally they like literal interpretations of some of the bible – especially if they can use them to decide who goes to heaven*) – is to see wealth as a sign of God's blessing. We even have a name for it - the prosperity gospel – classically a BMW is a sign of God's blessing – which makes my Skoda seem like God isn't blessing me that much...

Although - if I am brutally honest – it is not the flashy car I want – it is instead a guilty not so secret desire to shop in Waitrose or M and S – not because the food is any better - but simply to feel a bit posher – somehow the idea of browsing amongst the Waitrose essentials or the M and S gastropub range - instantly makes me feel a bit more like I'm a BMW rather than a Skoda – and that God is blessing me through the truffle crisps and the percy pigs.

I suspect – if you are honest too - you will also have secret desires that make you feel more valuable or more blessed. Are we looking for our worth in the material instead of focussing everyday on acknowledging that we are children of God?

The rich man missed the point that in God we are blessed and we have our worth – all of us equally – we are no better than each other – we are of infinite and equal value as children of God – the rich man ignored the poor man's worth.

The rich man realising it is too late for him - wants to warn his family – he pleads ignorance on their behalf – say it slowly - ignore-rance – the things we ignore and the things we deliberately don't want to know about – because deep down – we know that if we think about them – we will have to live differently.

Jesus gives the punchy bit – they have Moses and the prophets – what else do they really need – they are just ignoring or not hearing what is unpalatable.

I wonder - what do you know – deep down – you should be doing - but are choosing to ignore – and what like the rich brothers would it take you to listen and pay attention?

Maybe climate issues – maybe lifestyle choices – what we eat or drink or spend money on – maybe an addiction to Instagram or being liked – maybe the hunger for status in our jobs and our social circles - maybe ignoring the focus that we are children of God and not building this relationship through prayer –

maybe a call to ministry to work to share God's love...? What are we deliberately not hearing – what are we ignoring – that we know already?

We can't save the world on our own – thankfully our job isn't Saviour of the World – but ignoring what we need to pay attention to because we don't like the message - and pretending that we don't have to try is not good enough.

But - let us wake up and stop being ignore-rant - I read this week of one small change which might help us make a start – and it is simple and we can all do it... in our story today Jesus asks us to move from my wealth to our wealth – from me to us.

The change we can make is to focus on the pronouns we use when we desire or want things – try and observe how often do we say I or my or me when we want truffle crisps or help with something or time for a rest - whatever it is you desire or need – how would it be for us – just this week to say we, us when we consider our needs and desires – and then maybe move from that into action.

In our Lord's Prayer we say later – we ask for our daily bread – a reminder that food is for everyone – when thinking about my dinner – think about our dinner.

Let us not be ignore-rant – and allow God to help us focus on the right things.

Amen