

Hinde Street Methodist Church

22 September 2019 11.00am

Rev Peter Cornick

Preached at Harvest Festival, Café Church.

Seek first righteousness ...

²⁵ 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?'

On a recent shopping trip along Oxford Street to purchase a specific gift, I made a discovery. I went into five well known department stores, and was surprised to find very few people in them. I had plenty of space to choose my purchase. I was not jostled at all. Yet outside, in Oxford Street, the pavements were heaving with people. My conclusion is, very few of the people walking on Oxford Street seem to actually be shopping! Now this may explain the decline in high street shops, or why M&S has fallen out of the FTSE100. Or it might be that the people on Oxford Street that day were shopping in stores I had no intention of going in, because I'm not twenty and thin, or not rich enough. So my study is not very scientific.

I did wonder however, are these people pacing up and down Oxford Street, anxiously wishing they could buy what's in the window? Those who use a bright Yellow Selfridges bag as a handbag, yet haven't actually bought anything in the shop – at least not that day – are they portraying an anxiety for consuming more?

²⁵ 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?'

Another recent walk along Oxford Street had a different purpose, and I admit, that it was my wife, Helen, who was the lead in this. After the Welcome Service lunch, we were left with perhaps twenty rounds of sandwiches. So Helen and I walked along Oxford Street to give them to those who might appreciate them. I realise this won't end homelessness, but it did extend the warmth of our fellowship to others who couldn't make it.

My observations were these: most of the twenty or so people we offered sandwiches to, were – and I am guessing and generalising – eastern European to Middle Eastern in origin. Most – were women. All expressed gratitude in a language we didn't understand. One woman unwrapped the sandwich in front of us and ate as if she hadn't eaten for some days. One woman, who was British, and

clearly suffering from addiction, we were able to direct to the Connections at St Martins – who we at WLM are beginning to work in partnership with.

Perhaps this exercise did more to assuage our guilt at throwing away good food? It didn't help release the women from the street, or from addiction. But it did tell me, that whether through addiction, modern day trafficking and slavery, or whether by being a refugee, there are some people not a mile from here, who have every cause to worry, about what they are to eat or drink; what they will wear.

So, this passage, cannot be read in isolation from a society, where on a street offering the consumer dream, to those who want to buy, or are anxiously desirous of buying, there are others in the doorways of that street who, for various reasons, are excluded from that dream and barely survive.

²⁵ *'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?'*

So what does Jesus mean?

Look first at verse 24. There is an image here of the slave, and who the slave serves. This image from the first century, is of someone who is not a servant or domestic help, but someone who is owned by the master, the household. The slave is the property of that master – to be used or disposed. My fear is, that some of the women who Helen and I saw on Oxford Street, might also be slaves – the property of owners who force them to beg.

It seems somewhat strange then, that Jesus says, you cannot be a slave to two masters, because you might love one and not the other. I hardly think loving someone who enslaves you is in the equation. So is this a piece of irony? Because look at the next sentence, *You cannot serve God and wealth*. To serve God, is not to be enslaved. It is a choice one makes. And in serving God, one finds freedom, fulfilment and love. But to be enslaved to money, wealth, consumerism, is to be possessed by it, to be its property.

So, the image of the slave, the property of the owner, is used as a metaphor, for those who are in slavery to money and wealth. The property of acquiring more and more.

Still with verse 24, the word here, 'wealth'. It is that word, 'mammon' which is translated wealth. 'You cannot serve God and mammon.' Mammon is an Aramaic word. Jesus would have spoken Aramaic. And mammon means, simply, to have wealth or property. But it is the context in which the word is used which makes it interesting.

It is used four times, here and in the comparable passage in Matthew, and later in Luke.

Later in Luke, chapter 16, is the parable of the dishonest, or shrewd manager – the lectionary gospel for today. You might remember that the manager is seen to have acted by squandering his master's money. Fearing for his job, but wanting to be popular, the manager halves the debts of those who owe the master money. Bear in mind, these people are in phenomenal debt already. So, getting some money out of these people earns him favour with the master. The manager's reputation is saved. Or is it? Jesus has a twist.

⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth – or mammon – so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

Make friends with dishonest wealth? Jesus is using irony. Whilst the manager has saved his own neck, he has not treated the debtors fairly. So, here, mammon is seen to be tainted, dishonestly gained wealth.

¹¹ If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth – or mammon – who will entrust to you the true riches?

It might be better to translate this, as *unrighteous* wealth. Mammon, is therefore seen to be, unrighteous – un-Godly. Without a care for the justice and empathy given to those who are righteous.

So, verse 24, you cannot serve God, and be unrighteous at the same time.

And what do we find at the end of this passage?

³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Living righteously

And it is important that we understand that the passage is inviting us to live righteously, rather than without any food at all. Jesus is inviting us to become righteous in our lives. That is not pious, but with a concern for the things God would be concerned about. How do we alleviate or indeed end poverty and homelessness. Something we try to do through the work of WLM, whether it be through advice and help to get people off the streets, of counselling for those facing mental health crises. Righteousness: how do we challenge an economy which relies on us spending more and more – hence the endless upgrades of iPhones and the new fashion collection every autumn or in some cases, every week. It relies on us accruing personal debt. That has been an economic model for years. Is that righteous living? Or do we now discover that such an economy contributes to global warming and problems regarding the ethical disposal of our

technology? And contributes to personal feeling of desperation because it is becomes impossible for some people to pay off the debt?

²⁵ *‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?’*

This is not suggesting we make no sensible provision for our food and welfare. Even in Jesus’ day, it is suggesting excess is not good for the wider society, or indeed, ourselves.

Discipleship

I’m heading off in a different direction now.

Jesus gives a catalogue of those things not to worry about. Food, drink, clothing. He mentions the birds of the air who are provided for. Lilies whose beauty is offered as gift – not even the richest man apparently known to history then, Solomon, could be as beautiful as those lilies.

So, concludes Jesus, allow faith to rule your life, God will provide for you. So is this really a treatise about having faith. Don’t worry: have faith: everything will be alright. Such a message about faith, spoken by one who knew he would be executed, is hardly coherent. I could hardly preach such a message to the women in the doorways of Oxford Street. Such simplicity makes no sense in the world of Jesus or ours.

Ulrich Luz offers a different view of this passage altogether. He sees it as an encouragement to those following Jesus – to the disciples. Remember, the disciples had left everything – their nets, their tax collecting, their families, their stability, their whole known way of life. Up they got and followed him. If we saw a group of people doing so today, we’d think they were deluded, seduced by a cult, irresponsible perhaps. These disciples must have had their fears – having given up a job, where will the money come from to buy food? What about their wives and children – how were they going to cope, now the fishing boats were in the harbour?

Luz argues that this passage, suggests to the disciples, the important thing is to follow Jesus, and others will provide for you. Generosity and hospitality will be yours if you simply follow – and pursue righteousness. Now, these disciples it might be noted, are not addicted to substances, neither are they refugees or in slavery as far as we know. So they are not anxious for good reason. Jesus invites them, to forget how they support themselves, and to be supported – to have that faith in God’s provision.

We know that there were a wider group of people who supported Jesus and the disciples. Many of them we know were women. I suspect that some of this

optimism to forget about what to eat but strive for righteousness is because hidden and unheralded people – women – actually did the back tache work. Luke record in 8:3, that ‘many other women ... used their resources to help Jesus and his disciples.’ I’d love to discover their gospel. You might argue then, this passage is built on patriarchy.

The point Luz makes, is, as disciples, your primary task is to announce the good news – to seek the kingdom of righteousness. God will, through the generosity of others, provide.

It’s an interesting take on the familiar passage, and provides a context for Jesus’ words.

Thanksgiving

A third way of viewing the passage, is through the lens of thanksgiving. It is our harvest festival today. In the middle of a city, we struggle to connect to the means of food production – the land. *Farming Today* on the radio is about as close as we get.

But this passage invites us to be thankful. Look at the language.

²⁸ Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

It is a call to praise God for creation. Beauty.

²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

A joy of living in central London, is watching the fly past of parakeets – I know they’re considered a nuisance, but beautiful nonetheless. And where-else in Britain, can you go bird watching and get within feet of a heron and stare at it whilst it stares at you, but in Regent’s Park. Perhaps our cause for thanksgiving in the city is closer than we think, when we look.

There are plenty of other examples of thanksgiving for God’s provision and creation.

Does this passage simply invite us to give thanks, for the beauty of the earth? And, by asking us not to worry, or think we can, alone solve our problems, put us, properly, in our place.

The prophet Job, after his gruelling encounters with suffering writes:

Then Job answered the LORD:

² ‘I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

³“Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?”
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
⁴“Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me.”
⁵I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
⁶therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.

Conclusion

I have given three different but complimentary views on how to read this passage.

One has been to see it as a call to righteous living, particularly bearing in mind those who really do worry where they will next eat. It is a call too, to curb our excess, our addiction to consumerism.

The second, views the passage as an encouragement to the early disciples; to focus on announcing the gospel, and receive hospitality – although one wonders whether there is a feminist question to ask of the text.

The third, invites us to hear the poetry and see the images. To look around us at the wonders of creation. And to give thanks to God.

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