

SERMON – 10 after Trinity

The Revd Canon David Jennings, Canon Theologian at Leicester Cathedral

1. It is good to be here. My last visit to this beautiful Church was the occasion of Fr Bob's induction. I come from Leicester Cathedral. You have James Watt and Matthew Bolton; we merely have King Richard 111. Bob was my former curate, and we had many good times together. It is also good to see how well things are going in this parish, under Bob's leadership. Towards the end of the 1970s, I was Director of a project entitled All Faiths for One Race, based in the Lozells Social Development Centre, on Lozells Road, and I was assistant priest in the parish of Holy Trinity, Birchfield. It is good to be back here in Handsworth.
2. We live in a greedy world. We also live in a world where money and possessions seem to count for more than the quality of life, care and compassion for others, and a spirit of generosity. Someone in this country has just won £61.1 million in the Euro millions lottery. Now what can you do that will really make you happy with £61.1 million? Recently, the sad and disgraceful tale of the closure of BHS with the loss of 11,000 jobs and a depleted pension fund has focused on the way the company was plundered by the likes of Philip Green and Dominic Chappell. Two parliamentary committees have condemned their actions as the unacceptable face of capitalism, but it is pure greed that motivated them, including the avoidance of paying tax in this country, whilst reaping the benefits that this country provides. A worker at BHS has suggested that Mr (Sir) Philip Green sells two of his yachts to replenish the raided pension fund as he can only be on one yacht at a time! We shall see if there is any conscience amongst the wealthy for the plight of workers and pensioners. The Gospel reading for this morning, which only occurs in Luke, has Jesus warning the multitude about covetousness, and saying that a person's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. He then proceeds to tell the parable of the rich man who built larger barns to store his crops so that he could take his ease, eat, drink and be merry. God deems such a person a fool (the parable is often called that of the Rich Fool) as in the night his soul could be required, and who will have his possessions? The message and the teaching couldn't be clearer; it illustrates the fate of the man who loves neither God nor neighbour. The writer, referred to as The Preacher, of the book of Ecclesiastes warns of the sin of vanity. The word vanity translated denotes a breath, exhaled air that disappears. It is the equivalent of the name of the first man in the Bible to die, Abel and this may be no accident.

Ecclesiastes challenges the realisation of the prevalence of vanity, which includes leaving the fruits of work to others, who may be wise or foolish, and the pointlessness of it all is described as vanity. The implicit contrast is with that of wisdom and knowledge. The issue concerns human toil and everything gained by toil is left behind at death. God has given the toil and has given man the ability to see the meaninglessness of it. However, the author of the letter to the Colossians identifies a greater purpose. Having been raised with Christ, we should set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth. The writer provides a list of earthy things, reminds us of the wrath of God, and the need to put away these things. There is a new nature to which we are called and which transcends all, in that we are all in Christ. All of these readings present both a warning and a challenge, not least to the accumulation of wealth and possessions.

3. So where does that leave us today? Well, the greed of individuals of the like of Philip Green, and many others, has no place in the God scheme of things for human flourishing. Wealth and riches may bring transient pleasure and rewards, but ultimately, given the frailty and fragility of human life, such will count for nothing. On the other hand, in the wake of much wealth, eye popping salaries and bonuses for some, and massive lottery winnings, such must be set alongside the struggles of ordinary people to provide for themselves and their families, whether in this country, or perhaps more especially and critically in third world nations. The significant rise in inequality challenges community cohesion and risks serious consequences in how communities live and potentially flourish. Let me put it simply: God does not like poverty, wherever in the world such may exist; also, God does not like inordinate riches and wealth. Such creates a divisive society, world and communities. If the parable from Luke's Gospel, together with the challenge from Ecclesiastes and Colossians has anything to say to us, it concerns how the economics of the world and our nation should be ordered. In a recent book, *The Spirit Level*, Wilkinson and Pickett identify nations which have a low level of inequality. These nations, such as Finland and Sweden, have low levels of crime, mental illness and many other indices of social and community cohesion. Jesus had it right. God has it right. Wealth not only does not bring happiness; it is also destructive. It is vanity.