

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proverbs 22.1-23/James 2.1-17/Mark 7.24-37
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
10 September 2006

“THE ROYAL LAW: POVERTY AND WEALTH”

~Paul H. Friesen~

There is no safe or happy place to begin reading the *Epistle of James*. This epistle *leads* us to a safe and happy place, to a different kind of security and happiness than we might imagine. But it won't let us begin there.

So let's go straight to the hard words in this morning's reading: 'You have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich that oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they that blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?'¹

Indeed the name of Jesus was invoked over them at their baptism. But how did this ancient congregation of Christians get from their baptism into a community of shared hope to this messy situation? How is it that the ugly prejudices and politics of the Roman world had washed over this group of Christians?

There are harder words yet, near the end of the *Epistle of James*. So we might as well read them now too, as they didn't make it into the cycle of readings from *James* that we will hear over the next few weeks:

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen!

*The wages of your labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.*²

After such a visionary blast, like you hear in the Hebrew Prophets, like you see in Dante's *Inferno*, I would imagine that you, like me, are keen to define yourself as 'not rich'! If you are like me, and we are all alike this morning, I can always point to someone significantly richer than I am, even on my own street. But, finally, if you are like me it is hard to avoid the language of self-justification and self-righteousness

¹ All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise noted.

² *James* 5.1-6

when we talk about riches, so it might be good for us to return together to the faith we confess and the tradition we follow.

We can relax—a little. In the Hebrew tradition, as revealed in our shared Scriptures, wealth was a good and healthy thing. Abraham, Job, David, Solomon and a number of wealthy women in the Scriptures, old and new, were considered friends of God and friends of the poor, generally blessed by divine providence.

Do you remember the astonishment of the disciples when Jesus said it was as hard for rich men to enter the Kingdom of God as it was for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle?³ The disciples and the crowds had responded—if not the rich, blessed by God, what hope is there for anyone else? What on earth did Jesus mean?

In any case, Jesus did not condemn wealth outright. He enjoyed the hospitality not just of the wealthy righteous and the sinfully rich sinners. Jesus also sat at dinner with comfortable religious leaders and dined at lavish parties put on by powerful free-lance tax collectors, parties viewed much as private *mafia* celebrations are viewed today. It is true that Jesus himself was relatively poor, but he was cared for by Mary Magdalene and other wealthy women, we are told in the New Testament.⁴ So why did Jesus talk so often about poverty, and seem to favour the poor over the rich? And why did James say what he did?

To get to this we need to talk about poverty. At the time of Jesus' teachings and parables the view that was relayed throughout the Hebrew Scriptures was still in place. There were four groups of the poor: widows, orphans, sojourners (immigrants, like Ruth) and day labourers (about whom we heard about in James' rant).⁵ It was the duty of the rich to care for the poor and if they employed them to make sure they did not hold back their wages at dusk or keep their cloaks overnight, for they would neither eat at all nor sleep well otherwise. 'Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor,' we hear from the *Proverbs*. And we hear more, too. 'Oppressing the poor to enrich oneself...will only lead to loss.'

In fact, little was said in Scriptures about what is implied so often by some politicians: the laziness of the poor, such as those also found in our reading from *Proverbs* who under the pretext of fear won't take responsibility for themselves. But there isn't really much about the connection between laziness and poverty—at least not nearly so much as there is of the language we heard in *Proverbs* and *James* this morning about religious responsibility for the poor.

In the reading from the book of *Proverbs*, something else is at work—something that is at work in the Prophets too. There is a growing religious conviction that the relationship between the blessings of the rich and the needs of the poor should never be allowed to undermine the wonderful truth that 'the Lord is the maker of them all,'

³ *Luke* 18.23-26.

⁴ *Luke* 8.1-3.

⁵ See Richard Bauckham, *James* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.188.

as it is put. In fact we begin to hear about God's response to oppression: 'Do rob the poor because they are poor...for the Lord pleads their cause.'

It would seem, as 'liberation theologians' began to claim in the 1970's, that God takes the side of the poor. And God takes the side of the poor, it seems, God 'pleads their cause' quite simply because we so often don't. It's not the God favours one class of human beings over another—Jesus put the lie to that. James put the great truth in a despairing phrase elsewhere in his epistle: 'With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father and with it we curse those made in the likeness of God...My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.'⁶ Indeed, we must rejoice to confess that the Lord is maker of us all, and that our redemption is shared.

The hypothetical picture sketched by James is an ugly one. It might help to know that in that day the majority of ancient society, though poor by modern, western standards did not consider itself poor. The rich were as far from the norm as were the poor who teetered on the edge of begging, or crime, or being sold into slavery. The majority had no hope of wealth and were frightened of descent into poverty.

And so in the Christian assembly addressed by James the majority greet two new converts to the worship of Christ around the Lord's table. The rich man with the golden rings of the Equestrian class and the poor man in tatters, a true slave in a mean household enter and are instinctively directed to social positions that conform to the non-Christian house next door, not to the shared honours announced by the good news of the kingdom.⁷

This assembly, says James, has forgotten what James calls the 'royal law', the law of the Kingdom of God, that is the love of one's neighbour as one's self. This is detailed in the 'second table' of the Ten Commandments at the very front of our church, and summed up in our mission statement at the very back of the church, on the left, as you pass into the narthex upon departure from our own assembly.

We are all loved by God and so must never forget to love God or each other. This is the 'law of liberty', a strange paradox it seems.

"What is this 'law of liberty?'" asks James this morning. It is the law that begs us to allow mercy to 'triumph over judgement'. It is the law that urges them to remember that God's mercy to them is not the fruit of a comparative judgement amongst the people of the first century, but a desperately needed mercy generously addressed to the whole human race—past, present and future. The monk Bede, writing in one of Britain's darkest medieval centuries said that in this phrase 'mercy triumphs over judgement', James has assured us that 'the fire of sin is extinguished as if by the water

⁶ *James* 3.9-10.

⁷ See Bauckham, *James*, 189 and Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (London: A&C Black: 1980), p.98-99, 107-109.

of mercy.’⁸ And yet the judgement of comparative ‘worthiness’ has leeches into the soil of the assembly that James addresses, and mercy has evaporated like the morning dew.

John Calvin (with Martin Luther the greatest of the Protestant reformers who confessed God’s divine grace) summed up the end of our epistle today six centuries after Bede and three and half centuries before our own day. He said: ‘As it mocks a poor man to send him off words, and not bring him any help, so men mock God when they arrange their lives to avoid works...of sincere charity.’⁹

We all make arrangements, often unconsciously, to avoid granting the charity to others who need it—a charity that is granted to all of us through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. It is very good to give some of our abundance, as we do, by means of which emergency relief is granted to some poor on some of the many days they come into our church. It is so heartening that we, as a parish, give to global missions. It is wonderful that we look poverty with grace at *The Fish* coffee house across the street and in serving dinners up the road in St. George’s parish Hall. With God’s grace we shall do much more.

But there is something else. Who do we imagine sitting around us in this assembly—one year, two years, five years from now? If you are like me, you unconsciously imagine people much like you and me. I guess we all hope that they are even a little nicer than we are! But we don’t want to be threatened by their position in the world we walk out to every Sunday morning. The very rich and the very poor scare us a bit. But God made them all. This is the royal law of the kingdom.

Can we imagine sitting next to the poor man in tatters who came into James’ assembly—standing, kneeling and breaking bread at the Lord’s Table elbow to elbow, drinking from the same cup? It scares us I think because if this happens then they are on the road to becoming our brothers and sisters. Mercy then has begun to triumph over judgement.

There is yet something else. The people who come into our assembly are like the people who come into our home. Is it reasonable to believe that the charity of our assembly is disconnected from the charity of our homes? Or should we refuse the hospitality of others who share this house of prayer? Jesus shared in today’s Gospel all that he had with a woman, not a man; a pagan, not a fellow Jew; a troubled soul not a cheerful supporter. And she troubled his soul too. I want to eat at the same table, even if it is as a puppy on the floor, she said. And Jesus gave her so much more. Mercy triumphed over judgement, though Jesus had hoped to avoid any scene at all.

⁸ In *Bede the Venerable: A Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles*, trans. David Hurst (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988), p.37

⁹ John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels...and the Epistles of James and Jude*, trans. A.W. Morrison (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1972), p.283.

I heard recently of a bishop (I won't say whether he was Lutheran, or Anglican or Roman Catholic or Orthodox). He had gone to investigate a suspiciously successful assembly in California. There he met a biker in his leathers entering with him. The bishop asked: 'Now we would you be here—what attracts you?' The biker looked at him and said (if you'll excuse his language): 'Jesus—what the hell do you think?'

It is Jesus we share—the charity of the very Son of God, his life and death and resurrection for the life and death and resurrection of the whole world—his body and soul and spirit given for our bodies and souls and spirits. Who is at our elbow around the Lord's Table this morning, or next Sunday or the Sunday after—who do you imagine might be there, and in your home as your guest? Whose lives might we become a part of?

Thanks be to God for the divine call to Christ's table. Thanks be to God that those like us sinners have been invited.

Amen.