

## **SERMON: Sunday – 10 October 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **Can't buy me love**

**Amos 5:6-7, 10-15**

**Mark 10:17-31**

Jesus said, 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God' (10:25).

There are some very rich people in our world. Rich enough to fly to the moon even. Some are even rich enough to be devalued by \$6 billion because of a 6 hour social media blackout.

This week the Pandora report was published revealing how awful is the divide between rich and poor in our world; how millionaires, billionaires and corrupt leaders of nations embezzle money and invest it in offshore accounts and UK property.

A staggering amount is involved, estimated at more than \$11 trillion, about 5 times the combined GDP of the 54 countries in Africa, or about 4 times the GDP of the UK.

For the rich, money makes even more money.

Also this week, a report by the Joseph Rowntree Commission was published showing how life expectancy for the poor in Scotland is 25 years less because of the division between rich and poor.

When you're poor, it's very difficult to get out of poverty. Even to eat a healthy diet usually costs more than to eat cheaper food. And heating and energy costs are usually higher when you're poor.

Pre-payment meters are expensive. The poor can't invest in air source or ground source heat pumps or solar panels or wind turbines which are cheaper to run and better for the environment.

The poor often live in poorly insulated and poorly maintained housing. And so the spiral descends on and on further and further downwards and the poverty gap widens.

To paraphrase Mahatma Ghandi, there is enough in this world for every person's need but there is not enough for everyone's greed.

It seems that the world doesn't like that sort of talk, since it was this kind of

talk that cost Ghandi his life in 1948, a life he tried to shape around Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

God's word speaks loudly and clearly in favour of the poor and against poverty.

The prophet Amos, centuries before Jesus, calls out the rich who trample the poor and push aside the needy.

(SLIDE)  
Hate evil  
Love good  
Establish justice  
(5:15).

By the time of Jesus, it seems the poverty gap still existed, as it does still today.

And Jesus essentially says, it's not enough just to know the law and the commandments. That knowledge needs to be channelled into action through giving one's life to the cause of justice.

The rich young man may have been seen to be righteous in keeping the commandments not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal, not to give false testimony, not to defraud and to honour his mother and father.

But he was lacking one thing, a heart that acted in love towards others, in the same way he was there and then being loved by Jesus.

William Barclay, in his commentary on Mark 10, said that "respectability, on the whole consists in not doing things (whereas) Christianity consists in doing things".

It is perhaps the failure of Christians to live up to the life of Christ that caused Mahatma Ghandi to have reportedly said, "I like your Christ, but not your Christianity".

For Jesus, it's the kingdom of God that matters much more than the kingdoms of this world. Amassing earthly riches will only be a hindrance.

"How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (10:23).

Who then can be saved? (10:26).

The answer is clear in the text. Only God can do the impossible. For God all

things are possible (10:27).

Jesus appears to be saying to the disciples that there is a cost to following Jesus and to seeking the kingdom. Earthly things need to be laid aside for the sake of Christ and the good news. Earthly things need to be put to eternal purposes.

You can choose to be first in this life but you risk being last in the next. Or you can choose to live a different way, a better way. And only God can help us to do so.

William Barclay, in his commentary on Mark 10, speaks about how material possessions tend to fix a man's heart to this world". He tells a story of someone visiting a very ornate castle and remarking how that it was beautiful things like this that make it difficult to die. In other words, the more one hangs onto, the harder it is to let go.

But for God nothing is impossible. God transforms minds and hearts so that people begin to think in terms of how to best steward and share God given resources rather than thinking in terms of being possessive.

We all know that there are things money just can't buy. Money can't buy true happiness or love.

His money didn't make the rich man happy for we're told he walked away from Jesus in sadness.

We know it too because Lennon and Macartney got it right when they immortalised those words, "money can't buy me love".

As the song goes,

(SLIDE)

"Say you don't need no diamond rings  
And I'll be satisfied  
Tell me that you want the kind of things  
That money just can't buy  
I don't care too much for money  
Money can't buy me love".

I had a priceless moment this week standing at the kitchen window watching the birds in the garden - goldfinches, chaffinches, blue tits, great tits, coal tits, siskens, collared doves, wood pigeons, blackbirds, a robin .....

Money doesn't buy that sort of experience.

Or gazing at an old mature oak tree and all the biodiversity that it supports. What sort of price could you put on a 200 year old oak tree? You can't put a price on such things.

Not everything has its price. There are things money can't buy.

Clearly, for the oak trees that have recently now been felled to make way for new homes between here and East Calder, their value wasn't appreciated.

Money certainly can't buy love.

(SLIDE)

William Barclay wrote that "the man who trusts in himself and in his possessions can never be saved, The man who trusts in the saving power and the redeeming love of God can enter freely into salvation".

And I'm sure he was meaning salvation as freedom, quality of life and being loved and forgiven more than anything else.

Barclay is right to point out that the key to true happiness lies in spending yourself and your possessions on others.

In other words, as we said at the beginning, we're invited to steward what we have and put it to use for Christ and the kingdom of God.

And in this upside down kingdom is where we will find our vocation and true happiness. As Jesus puts it,

"no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age ..... and in the age to come eternal life" (10:29-30).

Carlo Carretto (1910–1988) was a member of the Little Brothers of Jesus, a community of contemplatives based on the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi.

He began "to hold conversations with all manner of creatures, and preach various sermons to them. . . .(and, in his own words, said)

(SLIDE)

I made an effort to make them understand that I was a friend. At first they were astounded and incredulous. But then they believed.

And they drew near.

And they listened to me. . . .

It was as if the dimensions of the Kingdom had been enlarged for me. . . .

It was as if the number of my sisters and brothers had become measurelessly

greater.”

[Carlo Carretto, I, Francis, trans. Robert R. Barr (Orbis Books: 1982)]

Jesus was right when he said, whatever you give up in this life you will receive a hundred times more (paraphrase 10:30).

One hundred times more sisters and brothers, like the animals and birds that Carlo Carretto lived with as well as all the sisters and brothers that people go on to inherit when they embrace faith in the one heavenly Father of all.

For early Christians, as well as for many today in countries where it's dangerous to become a Christian, it must have felt like that. To embrace Christ meant for many to be ostracised by their own birth family only to be welcomed into the much bigger family of faith.

One hundred times more and in the age to come, eternal life.

So what about us?

If we're rich then it's not easy to break our dependence on material possessions. It's like trying to squeeze a camel through the eye of a needle, or some other metaphor that speaks of it being nigh impossible.

But God says nothing is impossible. God has given us a new heart and a new mind. When we listen to it then we hear another song emerging from within us, a song Jesus sang, and sings still,

a way of life that allows us to be good stewards of what we have, employing our whole lives and our possessions to bless and to meet the needs of others, even if that means doing it from the lowest or last place.

For in the kingdom of God, many who are first will be last, and the last first (10:31).

O God

Where we are rich help us to use what we have to bless others

Where we are poor help us to trust in your providing

In Jesus name

Amen