

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE  
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

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**Sermon**

“Wealth matters!”

This is a title in the 2021 edition of the Global Wealth Report I came across recently. You will be pleased to hear that global household wealth was largely immune to the challenges the world faced last year, and that wealth per adult rose by 6% to reach a record high of nearly 80,000 USD. Maybe this was not what you experienced last year, and you wonder if your microscopic contribution made it into this report or why haven't you seen people around you benefit from this considerable increase.

This kind of statistic focuses on the upper echelons. Nevertheless, the report has the honesty to mention that one of the greatest divides today, the one between the poor and the rich, has not ceased to widen. We may not be among the 56 million 'high net worth individuals' worldwide (that is, those who are millionaires or more...), but most of us are on the rather comfortable side of the gap, and we cannot even imagine its breadth. There is more than our personal wealth that contributes to this divide: our decisions, our consumption have effects upon everyone on this planet. Look up a website that provides an ecological footprint calculator, which approximates how many Earths it would take to sustain all the

world's inhabitants in the same lifestyle that you lead. If everyone lived like me, we would need 3 Earths – it is eye-opening and sobering.

“Nowadays, the rage for possession has got to such a pitch that there is nothing in the realm of nature out of which profit cannot be squeezed.” Dixit Erasmus of Rotterdam, at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There is nothing new under the sun.

We have just heard one of the most radical exhortations of Jesus: “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor.” These are certainly words “sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4.12) Do you feel “laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account” (Hebrews 4.13)? I do. It's so difficult to let possessions go.

Is this a story about condemnation of wealth?

There are two narratives running through the Old Testament. On the one hand, in the book of the prophet Isaiah, there is judgement against Israel's wealthy people, who pile up houses one after the other. Prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel also challenged the wealthy. On the other hand, Abraham, Jacob, or Job's wealth are tangible proof of God's blessing and faithfulness. Wealth, of itself, is not seen as evil.

No wonder the disciples are perplexed. If those who appear most blessed have more difficulty to enter God's Kingdom than a camel going through the eye of a needle, then who can be saved?

Throughout the ages, the Churches had a variety of views and teachings on wealth, ranging from “wealth is an offence or, at least, an obstacle to Christian faith” to

“wealth is the outcome of faith”. The last century saw the development of a prosperity theology or “the health and wealth gospel”, claiming that financial blessing is God’s will for Christians. Whatever their theology, rather often the Churches embraced wealth and the power that came with it – or, at least, they befriended the wealthy and encouraged their benevolence, without questioning how their wealth had been acquired. Wealth matters.

Is this a story about enrolling for voluntary poverty?

Let’s be honest: poverty is a perpetual state of anxiety and stress, it makes one sick in body and in spirit. Poverty is pernicious.

Nevertheless, Gospel stories, like the one we read, have inspired some to follow Jesus’ exhortation.

In the thirteenth century, Francis of Assisi, *Il Poverello*, abandoned his own wealth and his inheritance, to live among the destitute. Yet we must understand that, for Francis, being poor was not a question of being without possessions merely for the sake of being without possessions. Rather, it was a sign of his poverty of spirit, that is, his total reliance on God in every aspect of life. For Francis this was not a deprivation, yet a wonderful liberation. He could now walk unhindered towards the utter poverty of Jesus on the cross.

In the third century, after listening to our Gospel reading in church, St Anthony the Egyptian went home with urgency to sell his property and donate the funds to the poor. He then moved into a cave in the desert to seek the Lord. After hearing the same verses today, very sadly, I don’t think I’m going to feel the same urgency to change my life. Half-hearted commitment to Christ? Lukewarm Christianity? What is it that I am called to give away? On what possessions is God calling me to loosen my grip? How could I unburden myself to follow Christ?

“Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor; [...] then come, follow me.” Follow me – yes, this story is an invitation to discipleship.

The man of means who approaches Jesus with urgency – he ran up! – is responding to prophet Amos’s injunction: “Seek the Lord and live!” He is a good and decent man, and of great faith. Yet he knows that despite his righteous life of honouring the tradition, keeping the rules, respecting the Law, practising the rituals, he is unfulfilled. Do we have a similar craving in our righteous life? Besides our reading the Scriptures, praying, coming to church? Are we hungry for more meaning? Do we have a desire to be with God in all eternity? Or do we just seek a word of affirmation that everything we are doing is right and that nothing taxing will be asked of us?

Jesus’ call is one to a life of discipleship, not to a life of poverty. Jesus invites the rich man to a life of meaning and purpose which so far has evaded him. This call “challenges and indeed cuts right across the instinctive attachment to that which we possess” (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*). Once again, all that it means to follow Jesus bruises our instincts towards self-preservation and security.

Jesus offers the rich man a call to discipleship, he invites him to give up all that makes up his identity and status in the world. The kingdom of God confronts us with a vision of life and identity quite incompatible with so many of our presuppositions about wealth, prerogatives, and selfhood – it leads inexorably to an identity crisis. Yet we are offered a new identity in Christ.

The rich man is not yet prepared to take the hard road of discipleship and to trust that God will accompany him on that road, guiding him through loss, shadow, suffering. Are we, individually or as a Church, fully prepared to walk that road? Or do we still look for worldly security?

Pope Francis, who has occasioned much criticism by choosing simplicity in liturgy, in his lifestyle and in his service, calls the Church to be “a poor church for the poor” and to leave behind wealth, the yearning for status and power, and all the strings that tie it to the world. And also to make the leap forward in love that Jesus asks of the rich man; without it, he says, our life and our Church become sick of “complacency and self-indulgence” (*Evangelii Gaudium*).

How could we make this leap forward without choosing a poverty in spirit, that is, our total reliance on God? Jesus Christ always points to the Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden, so that we accept and welcome our utter dependence on his mercy alone. He points to God as absolute claim and final succour. Christ gives us assurance that “for God all things are possible.” This shifts the question away from how eternal life can be inherited to how we can live having encountered grace. If we recover a sense of grace, then the way to humble service, common good and love for one another will be open. In all our striving and hesitating and failing, Jesus will keep on looking at us through the eyes of divine love, never giving up on us, because, truly, for God all things are possible.

Amen.