



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

*13th October 2024
20th Sunday after Trinity*

Reflection

I wonder if you are sometimes struck by the apparent contradictions in the readings set for a particular day?

Today we read in Amos a series of dreadful warnings to those who trample the poor, afflict the righteous and push aside the needy. The prophet has in his line of fire those who have become comfortably rich by oppressing others. But Psalm 90 ends with a heartfelt plea to the Lord – prosper for us the work of our hands, O prosper the work of our hands! These two readings together show us the paradox that we all have to live with – we want to be both rich and righteous, both materially secure and spiritually healthy.

The conflict between these two is spelled out most sharply in the gospel reading. A rich man has every earthly possession – and we don't know how he obtained them; perhaps he was one of those who oppress the poor, and he has a bit of a conscience about that. But perhaps he just inherited his wealth or worked honestly for it. All we know is he throws himself at Jesus' feet with a profound sense that something in his life is missing. He has kept the law as faithfully as he could and it seems that God has prospered the work of his hands, but he is still unsettled.

What's missing? The Bible often speaks of "one thing".

The speaker in Psalm 27 says "One thing I asked of the Lord, to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord".

When Jesus heals a blind man in John 9 and the man is questioned by the religious authorities, he says, “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

St Paul says in Galatians 2 that the leaders of the Jerusalem church “asked only one thing, that we remember the poor.” And in Philippians 3 he says of himself, “This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.”

The example that perhaps comes most readily to mind is when Jesus is in the house of Mary and Martha, and he chides the busy sister by saying, “There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Jesus speaks to the rich man in Mark 10 in similar terms: “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

In all of these examples, one thing has been identified as the most important thing for them – beholding God’s beauty, seeing clearly at last, remembering the poor, focusing on the future, sitting at the feet of Jesus, or in the case of the rich man, turning from his possessions to follow Jesus.

And all of them indicate something that was missing or holding them back. It may have been physical or spiritual blindness, or forgetfulness of the needs of others, or dwelling on the past, or too much concern with trivial tasks. In the rich man’s case, he had made an idol of his wealth and he couldn’t bring himself to walk away from it.

This isn’t to let us off the hook about wealth. It’s not just the rich man in the gospel who is challenged about his possessions. For most of us in the developed world, hanging on to the comfortable life we have, or aspiring to more and more material goods, may be a spiritual problem. How much is enough? Are we too concerned with our financial affairs to notice the one thing that is missing?

I don’t know about you, but I’ve never met a monk or nun who seemed bitter about their lack of possessions. Over 30 years of ministry, I’ve known plenty of people who are poor, at least in a First World sense, but who praise God daily for the things they have – their families, their health, their faith. Conversely, I have met a lot of wealthy people, and some of them have sat lightly to their riches, given them away generously, and found a sense of peace and meaning in their lives that had nothing to do with money. Others have been consumed with anxiety and envy and have lived restlessly and unhappily.

What is the one thing we lack? Or in a positive framing, what is the one thing needful? As the examples from scripture show, it may be different for different people. It’s a deeply personal question. Spiritual directors often ask it: What is your heart’s desire? St Augustine answered it in the famous words in his Confessions, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our

heart is restless until it rests in you.” And he had some regrets about his rich and careless youth, which kept him from baptism until his thirties. He wrote, "Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved You. And see, You were within and I was in the external world and sought You there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which You made. You were with me, and I was not with You.”

Augustine’s Christian life began in what was middle age in his time, but what a fruitful life it turned out to be. For many of us, the questions about meaning and desire only surface in mid-life, when we have tackled many of the tasks of adulthood. The work of our hands may have prospered, we may have found contentment in personal relationships, we may be fortunate enough to have a satisfying career. Or perhaps our personal life has come unstuck or our work has not been fulfilling, and we may have made big changes in those areas. But the question remains: What one thing is lacking? What do I still need? Why does my heart remain restless?

I find it fascinating that so many people in rich societies are turning to this question after years of adult striving. The BBC series called Pilgrimage follows groups of celebrities who put on their walking boots and open themselves up the experience of travelling traditional routes to holy sites. The mediaeval route of the Camino to Santiago de Compostela is today walked or cycled by nearly half a million people every year, and pilgrimages to Rome, Canterbury, Walsingham, Iona, Lindisfarne and many less well-known destinations are growing in popularity all the time.

After the post-service coffee, I’ll be sharing some of my own experiences of walking the Camino nearly 20 years ago, and my more recent connections with St Albans Abbey, where every visitor is treated as a potential pilgrim and the heart of the cathedral is the restored shrine of Britain’s first martyr.

It is possible of course to go on a pilgrimage as a sporting or cultural holiday, or simply to have some sociable exercise with a group of people who may become new friends, but it is hard to escape the questions that every such long-distance walk poses. Why is there a pilgrimage-shaped hole in your life? What is driving you to make this journey? And how are you hoping to be changed by this experience? Are you prepared to be challenged and surprised?

The rich man in Mark’s gospel wasn’t ready yet. He turned and walked away, and Jesus let him go. But we don’t know the end of his story. Perhaps he heard the gospel preached after the resurrection of Jesus, and like St Augustine, his heart was still restless, and he turned away from his comfortable life to seek the one thing needful after all.

Perhaps we are still feeling spiritually restless and wondering if the one thing most needed is missing from our lives. We shouldn’t worry if that is the case. It will always be true in a way for every living person. If we felt we had everything we needed, we would no longer thirst

for the nearer presence of God. We are in a sense all pilgrims until we reach our eternal home and see God face to face.

We have to keep confronting the paradox that the readings for today set before us. We want to prosper and be safe and happy in this world. But our deepest need is to be at home with God, and that may mean leaving many of the securities of this life behind. Let us not be afraid to admit this contradiction and follow where our restless hearts may lead us.

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