

Introduction

“Handling wealth properly”: Appropriately this message is being delivered on 1st April-April Fools` Day. It is appropriate for three reasons. **Firstly because riches makes fools of us-how so?** We look to money to give us security, status and well being. Jesus told us not to fall for that delusion. He warned us against “the deceitfulness of riches” (Mt 13:2). Sometime ago The Economist magazine (20 June 1987 page 93) in an article headed “The wretchedness of being rich”, and The Economist should know, looked at the lives of 5 fabulously wealthy men (Ford, J Paul Getty, Howard Hughes, Aristotle Onassis and Charles Clore). It concluded “that they were, at best, emotional cripples, unable to give or receive love. At worst they were mad, bad and quite as dangerous to know as any of the robber barons of turn-of-the-century America....as addicted to money as other unfortunates become addicted to alcohol, or heroin or power.” Of one it said his “private life was as great a failure as his business life was a spectacular success” and an associate recalled that “He was the saddest man I knew....He was very lonely.” In the light of that James warning is hardly an exaggeration. They all demonstrate the tragedy of loving money and using people instead of loving people and using money.

The second reason for 1st April being appropriate is the message of Jesus recorded in Luke 12:13-21, known as the parable of **the rich fool**, now in many ways the rich fool did what would seem to us to be sensible. He was increasing and conserving his assets. He had made good provision for his old age. Just what our government tells us to do today as it views with alarm the mounting costs in coming years of providing pensions and care for an expanding ageing population. Was Jesus condemning success and hard work? Why was he reserving some of his sternest criticism for the type of person that frankly we need more of? What was so bad about this guy? Would Jesus have preferred him to work half as hard and achieve far less? Not at all. The point that Jesus is making is that the man’s attitude and aims were wrong. The man says my barns, my crops, my grain, my goods. But ultimately they were not his. He had them as a trustee or steward from God. He had invested his well earned wealth in the wrong bank. A bank that was doomed to fail, the bank of this world and not in heaven. He was short sighted. He planned for this life but not beyond. He was poor towards to God. Like the Christians in the church at Laodicea he thought “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing” But Jesus` penetrating eyes saw their true condition “you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind (even worse than short sighted) and naked.” Jesus commanded them to get pure gold from him.

Thirdly 1st of April is for many **the start of the financial year**. It is good at the end of a financial year and the start of a new one to **take stock**. Lets us do that and ask ourselves some questions. “How rich am I?” “With whom do I compare myself?” “What is my wealth made up of?” We will come back to these questions.

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Who is James addressing? That is easy “You rich people”. Who did he regard as rich? People who had plenty of gold and silver which they kept for themselves, and lots of clothing. Clothing is mentioned here because it was a way of storing wealth. Suits of clothes were often used as an acceptable means of payment or for gifts. You may recall in one of Jesus parables about a wedding, the host provided the guests with suits to wear. What should they do about being rich? “Weep and wail”. Hang on his first readers might have said that is a bit strong. Was not God’s friend Abraham incredibly wealthy? And what about Job, was he not “the greatest (ie richest) man in the East” about whom God himself said “he is blameless and upright”? James may well have responded by saying something like, yes poverty is dreadful and God certainly does not want us to go around in sackcloth living lives bordering on destitution, far from it, God is good and he who has given us all things richly to enjoy (1Tim 6:17) but God is desperately concerned about our attitude to material possessions, the problem is not having wealth but attitudes towards it and what we do with it

There are three things that worried James about the wealthy people he had in mind. The first was that they had wrongly hoarded their wealth (verses 2-3); the second was that they had wrongly gained their wealth (verses 4 and 6) and the third was that they had wrongly used their wealth (verse 5). Let us take them in turn.

Wrongly hoarded wealth (vv 2-3). Unused wealth is valueless to you and it depreciates as it sits there. What about those wardrobes of clothes? Last year’s fashions darling do I hear you say? While we should not go around down at the heel, looking like a load of frumps, there surely must be a better use for our money? Your hoarded wealth will corrode your flesh on the day of judgement when Paul says everyone’s work will be tested by fire (1 Cor 3:12-15). James has been piling up the seriousness of his charges. First he said that this wealth is deteriorating, wasting away, more seriously it is actually going to contribute to your judgement for it will be evidence against you. Now he reaches the climax of his charges. Worst of all you have hoarded wealth in the last days. Here we are, living at the end of history. Jesus will soon return and you could have used your wealth to do so much good, to spread the wonderful news about Jesus to thousands, but instead of putting it to good use you have let it rot and you have failed to play your part in advancing the Kingdom of God. Hoarding up wealth is so short sighted.

Wrongly gained wealth. (vv4 & 6) Wealth had been accumulated by not paying off debts. Workmen had been left unpaid. In those days labourers were paid their daily wage at the end of each day. They were utterly dependent on it. If they did not get paid in full promptly then they and their families would have little or possibly nothing to eat that night or the next day. James is passionate about such injustice. The labourers were utterly powerless they had done their work turned up for their pay and told to clear off. They had no friends in high places; there was no one to take up their cause. At least that is what the exploiters thought. But James says the poor do have a friend in high places, indeed there could be no one higher. They have God himself who will act on their behalf. He says firstly that the unpaid wages that are sitting in your vaults wasting away unused because even you with all your extravagance could not manage to spend them, those unpaid wages are crying out to God. But in addition to the cry of the corroding wages there is another cry. What is it? The cry of the harvesters themselves, it is not as if the rich could

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plea in their defence, well I could not pay the ploughboys, because it was a long way from harvest and I had the seed to pay for, I had a liquidity crisis at the time. There was no such excuse. This was the harvest, the crop was about to be sold and money was about to come rolling in, he was about to be flush with cash. The harvesters' cries did not echo round empty unheeding hills and valleys. The cries went straight to the "ears of the Lord Almighty". James uses a special phrase for the Lord Almighty. It is the only name of God in the Greek version of the Old Testament that is transliterated from the Hebrew to the Greek and not translated, so keen were the scholars to preserve its meaning. The name is used only twice in the New Testament. It is "One of the most majestic of all the titles of God" (Tasker ad loc). The full title is "The LORD of hosts."

Jeremiah particularly valued it using it some 88 times. It shows God at all times as the Saviour and Protector of his people. Who are the "hosts" in mind? Not mere armies on earth. They are all the heavenly powers ready to do the Lord's command. If you want to take them on I pity you. So short sighted.

Wrongly used wealth (v5). Again we see a very short sighted approach. The only thing they have in mind is the here and now; they see only this "earth" (verse 5). Their only thought is luxury and self-indulgence. No serious thought about others or anything else. Jesus warns against such an outlook in Luke 16:19-21. He tells of a rich man and a beggar called Lazarus. The rich man was clothed in purple, the raiment of kings and very expensive, with fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was a poor man who longed just for scraps from the rich man's table, he was so poor even the dogs had pity on him and comforted him a little. Both men died. Lazarus went to heaven and the rich man went to hell. I don't know why but in church tradition the rich man has been given a name. It is Dives. But there is not a scrap of evidence for giving him a name in the text. I think Jesus left him unnamed deliberately. Why? Because in the courts of heaven Lazarus the poor man counted, he had a name. Jesus knew his name. Our heavenly Father knew his name. But, who was this rich man. He did not count in the courts of heaven, he was a stranger there. As far as God was concerned he was a nobody, a nonentity, he had no weight. Oh, yes say the rich man's name to the local bank and you would get your cheque honoured immediately. But present his name in the heavenlies and you would be dismissed. He does not count in the places it really matters. Get your self a name that is recognised in heaven rather than one that only carries weight on earth.

These then are James's three charges: they were wrongly hoarding wealth; wrongly gaining wealth and wrongly using wealth. It might be useful now to re-evaluate James's message in the light of the present day. How did you feel when we read this passage earlier? Did you feel like me when I first read this passage in thinking about this morning? To be frank I thought James had gone over the top. Did you feel like that? All this about weeping and wailing, what is there to weep and wail about?

I should now like to call **three witnesses**. The first is Avner Offer Professor of Economic History at Oxford; the second is clinical psychologist Oliver James and the third is-wait and see.

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Professor Offer's recent book "The Challenge of Affluence" points out that though wealth has increased hugely in the last 50 years, happiness has not. Once people get above what is needed for basic needs they then get obsessed by their position in the pecking order and who has got more and better houses, cars, holidays, jobs and so on. In addition people have become a lot more individualistic. The outcome has been a huge increase in divorce, personal bankruptcies (more often because of divorce, illness or job loss rather than credit being too easy) obesity and depression among other things. The life styles of the wealthy raise the levels of what is regarded as normal. Consequently more and more people feel dejected because they are left behind: they feel failures (which they are not) and that life is unfair (which it is and always has been). "Most indices of well-being prioritize income per head [yet]...the very richest society lags behind in health and mortality" [page 299]. He concludes that "Affluence has not been good for the family, the pursuit of self-fulfilment has been self-defeating" [page 334]. A truth that Jesus pointed out 2,000 years ago when he said that whoever saves his life will lose it and whoever loses his life will save. Living for self is death. There is much more that he says about "the deceitfulness of riches" that we would do well to take notice of.

Our second witness is Oliver James. Writing in the "Guardian" about "Affluenza" on 1 January 2007, he describes "Affluenza" thus "The Affluenza virus is a set of values which increase our vulnerability to psychological distress: placing a high value on acquiring money and possessions, looking good in the eyes of others and wanting to be famous. Many studies have shown that infection with the virus increases your susceptibility to the commonest mental illnesses: depression, anxiety, substance abuse and personality disorder...The virus promotes Having over Being and the confusion (through advertising) of wants with needs."

Now I call in my **third witness**. Actually it is a group of witnesses. In the Old Testament the prophets would call to the fore these witnesses, they are "**the heavens and the earth**". While there is room for debate about the causes of climate change, there is no doubt that we are accelerating it. We may call on China and India to reduce pollution, but who is buying the cheap goods those nations produce? If they reduce their outputs then will we not be condemning millions to continue to live in abject poverty? There is no easy answer and there is no painless one. Dictatorships will not implement policies that will erode their wealth base and democracies cannot because they know that not enough people are going to vote for a party that wants to reduce unilaterally standards of living in order to save the planet.

Conclusion. James is not overstating the case when he says that the rich should weep and wail. As a society we should. We can see that just accumulating stuff and more stuff is leading us into all sorts of problems yet we are unwilling to do anything about it! What James is saying is a timely message for today. What should we do about it? Let us go back to those three questions I mentioned earlier: "How rich am I?" "With whom do I compare myself?" "What is my wealth made up of?" How do you measure your self-worth? If it is in terms of money and possessions then repent and ask the Lord to cleanse you and to set you free. If your identity comes from what you own then repent! How desperately sad to be defined by stuff. Oh do you know so and so? Oh isn't he the bloke that owns a top of the range Beemer? To envy people for what they own is to belittle them, but if what they own is all that they are then we should pity them.

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Wealth is a blessing from God, but God will turn to a curse our blessings if we do not set our hearts to honour him (Mal 2:2), if we focus on the blessing rather than the blesser. Wealth is a blessing from God, but we are accountable to him for the way we obtain it and the way we use it. We are called to be stewards of what we have and Jesus challenges us that our first priority should be the Kingdom of God. We should strive to promote our well-being rather than income and status symbols. Well-being comes primarily from our relationship with God. We are followers of him who though he was rich for our sakes became poor. Let us all just for a few moments quieten ourselves before God and ask the Holy Spirit to sift through our values and to ask ourselves whether they are the right ones and whether they are the ones that Jesus had. Let us make sure that our hope is not in uncertain riches, either those we would like to have or those we do have, but firmly and solely in God himself and his grace.

Simon Guillebaud told us about the poor man beside the road in Burundi. He was alone, starving, in rags, destitute. His family had been murdered, his goods stolen, his home destroyed. And the man said “I did not know that Jesus was all I needed until Jesus was all I had”.

Jesus once spoke to a rich church. Let us take his words to heart individually, not point to a collective other, but only to ourselves as individuals accountable to God. “You say I am rich, I have acquired wealth, and do not need a thing. ` But do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see.” Their life priorities of getting more and more stuff had edged Jesus out of their lives, so he urged them to make room for him. “Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens up the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me (Rev 3:20).

Whether you are rich or poor please do not be poor towards God.