

11.10.15

Amos 5:6-15, **Mark 10:17-31**

Getting our Priorities Right.

'It's time to get our priorities right'. That was the title of a newspaper article written by Kezia Dugdale, the leader of the Scottish Labour party, a couple of weeks ago. She had been visiting a nursery and primary school, not just to have fun playing with the building blocks but to highlight an important campaign issue – to *'make sure that every single child in Scotland gets a fair chance in life'*. She challenges all political parties to *'focus on the future'* by investing in children's education.

Getting our priorities right has a big impact on our future, whether it's as a nation, a community and as individuals.

In the OT reading, we hear from Amos, who addresses the nation of Israel at a time when they seriously need to consider their priorities. They're feeling politically secure and spiritually smug: they're God's chosen people, surely, they think, we'll be alright. But Amos warns them, they must learn to get their priorities right: *'Seek the Lord and live'* he commands. Why is he saying this? Because they are so busy going through the religious rituals, enjoying their prosperity, living lives of extravagance and luxury that they seem to have forgotten what is really important and have become corrupt and oppressive. *'Seek the Lord and live'*. Get your priorities right! and he goes on to detail how in the future their riches will be taken away. (*'Although you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them, though you have planted lush vineyards you will not drink their wine'*) There is hope though, if they turn back to God, Amos says, *'perhaps the Lord Almighty will have mercy.'*

Rather like the Israelites at the time of Amos, the man in the Gospel story had things pretty good in his life. Adding information from the other Gospels, we learn that he was young and a ruler, probably a member of an official council or court. He has a good, prosperous life. But it seems that he's been listening to Jesus' teaching and senses that Jesus has something even greater, something attractive which he wants.

So he runs up to Jesus and falls on his knees before him. 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' he asks. Maybe, he thinks, there's some little thing I could do a bit better which would really make my future secure?

And as Jesus lists some of the Ten Commandments: don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't give false testimony, don't defraud (which might be a bit like coveting) and *do* honour you father and mother, the man is able to say 'yes, I've tried really hard and done a pretty good job of keeping all those commands, since I was a boy'.

Jesus picks out these commands about relating to other people, which roughly equate to the last six of the Ten Commandments, knowing that this man would have been very strict about obeying, certainly the literal meaning of these rules. (Jesus, of course elsewhere in the Gospels, expanded some of these to be far wider reaching. For example he said that even getting angry or being disrespectful of someone is like wishing them dead and would deserve judgement. Also, looking lustfully at someone is committing adultery in the heart. And also here, Jesus is about to expand somewhat on what some of the other commandments might mean.)

But this young devout Jewish man was quite confident that he scored OK on obeying these commands about relating to others.

Why did Jesus not begin with the first two commandments? I think, because he knows that this is where the man is lacking in commitment if he really wants to follow Jesus and receive eternal life.

Let's look at the first two of the Ten Commandments: 'You shall have no other gods but me' and 'You shall not make for yourself an idol'.

They are about putting God first and not having any idols. About getting priorities right. Was this young man putting God first in his life? or did he have other things (idols) which were more important to him?

When we hear the word 'idol', we might have pictures in our mind of gold statues or carved images, but an idol can be anything which we are tempted to put first, make more important than God is to us.

An idol is anything we depend upon to meet the needs of our hearts, our deep needs of love, security, worth, or significance. When we seek to find our identity and security in something besides God, we have made it an idol.

So what is it that takes over, in each of our lives?

It could be our relationships, family or home, or maybe we are always worrying about money. Perhaps we become totally engrossed in sport or films or music. Perhaps we are concerned too much with what we look like or what other people think of us, how well we're progressing in our career. Many of us have a strong tendency to want to 'keep busy'. How many times have I heard someone say to me '*You'll be alright if you keep busy*'? It may even be that we spend a lot of our time doing really good and important things: charity work or caring for other people, **but** even these can become idols.

All these I've just mentioned are not necessarily bad things in themselves, and we may not need to **stop** doing them, but learn to worship God through them rather than letting them take over and become more important to us than God is. When they are the most important things in our lives, **then** they are like idols, it's as if we are bowing down to them instead of God.

And God says about idols '*You shall not bow down and worship them, for I, the Lord am a jealous God*'. That's a mind-blowing thought - that we actually make God jealous every time we think other things are more important to us than him! How amazing is his love and concern for us!

Just like the love that Jesus had for the young man: 'he looked at him and *loved* him' and then told him to sell everything he had and give to the poor. Jesus could see what it was that was in the way of this man coming and following him. This man's riches were his 'idol'.

Remember, if we want to follow Jesus, then he wants to be first in our lives and we should be most concerned with pleasing him. We are 'rich' in many ways, blessed with so many pleasures and material luxuries. So it's worth thinking hard about those things in each of our lives, which we are tempted to put before God, things we 'bow down to' instead of him. We can confess our preoccupation with these things to God and ask for his help to get our priorities right so we can bow down and worship him alone in all we do and look forward to being blessed with even greater riches both now and in eternity.

If we think this all sounds really impossible then we're in good company! Jesus' disciples certainly did. When Jesus says '*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God*', they ask in stunned amazement '*Who then can be saved?*'

I like the way this dialogue is put in the Message translation of the bible:
When the disciples ask *'Then what chance has anyone of being saved at all?'*

Jesus replies: *'No chance at all if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it!'*

The question is: ***will we let God do it?***

The hope for salvation and eternal life does not lie in us. It comes from God who loves us so much that he sent Jesus to die for us, taking the punishment which we deserve and restoring our relationship with him so that we **can** look forward to receiving the gift of eternal life. Surely that's enough to inspire us to trust him to bring us to a point where we can give up our earthly treasure (our idols), the obstacles which get in the way of us following Jesus.

Let's pray that **we** won't go away sad like the rich young man, because we can't bear to give up or put in their proper place the other things we love, our 'earthly treasure'.

Instead, will we trust him to provide us with 'treasure in heaven' - the great and glorious promise of eternal life? Gifts and blessings which are far beyond anything we can possibly imagine.

Let's get our priorities right!

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