

1 Timothy 6:6-19 True Wealth
Luke 16:19-31
September 25, 2022

For the last couple of weeks, we, along with the rest of the world, have with varying degrees of interest watched the proceedings associated with the passing of Queen Elizabeth. I haven't mentioned much about it, partly because we are Americans and it is not really our business, and partly because I did not know what to say.

But if there is anything relevant for us in this setting, perhaps it can serve as an illustration, and if so, then it is likely to be associated with the staggering wealth of the royal family. They are rich. Given the bible's apparent preference for the poor, and the well-known spiritual dangers associated with wealth and power, their example is relevant to us and to our topic for the day.

They may also serve as an illustration because of their Christian faith. I must confess that I have never really taken the royal family seriously as Christians. I thought their faith was mostly show. I have thought that it is absurd that the monarch is the head of the Church of England.

But recently I have come to understand that their faith is more important to them than I previously thought, and accept that *her* faith was genuine, and I take them at their word. And that means that I am related to them in Christ, they are by brothers and sisters.

The two texts for the day are about wealth and its affects on the spiritual lives of those who share both riches, *and* faith in Jesus. The first text is a parable about a particular rich man who never suffered want in his life, and yet lived, without even noticing, in close proximity to destitute poverty. It was, in fact, right outside his gate.

It is the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, of course. One interpretation is to spiritualize it so that it doesn't have to do with literal wealth and is not really about the economics of things. But that interpretation fails us and fails to do earthly life justice because we all have to deal with the economics of things. It also fails to do the bible justice, which insists that, like the poor, the world will always have the rich with it, thus sooner or later, there will be rich Christians. And there are.

Though none of us can claim to be rich by comparison to the royal family, we must conclude that we are also not like Lazarus in his poverty. The point of the parable is challenging, that in the next life, the chasm between the rich man and Lazarus is reversed, and it is then too late to do anything about it.

Then there is the text from 1 Timothy, which I like because it is propositional in nature and that corresponds with the way my mind works. It also speaks of wealth, and in terms that cannot be "spiritualized" away. Paul gives Timothy advice about how to be to pastor to the wealthy, what to say to them.

Once again, I am reminded of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the deans of the various chapels where the royal family worships; the Westminster Abbey, and St. George's at Windsor, St. Paul's Cathedral.

In addition to the warning inherent in the parable, let us consider also the counsel of Paul to Timothy, which gives us a good set of ideas that turn out to be, not just good advice for the wealthy, but also for every believer, even those of more modest means, no matter their inherited status in life.

Godliness with contentment is great gain . . .
Those who want to get rich fall into temptation . . .
The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil . . .

Instead, pursue:

Righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness . . . Take hold of eternal life . . . to which you were called.

Now these admonishments were given to Timothy to apply to his own life. Paul also gave counsel for Timothy to pass on to the rich people in his congregations, tell them:

To do good
to be rich in good deeds
to be generous and willing to share . . .
so that they can take hold of the life *that is truly life*.

Come to think of it, this is not bad counsel even for those who do not consider themselves to be rich, even for those who are *actually* not rich. Going on, tell them:

Do not be arrogant, nor put *hope* in wealth, which is uncertain, but hope in God who richly provides . . .

Let us confess, it is hard not to be attached to the things in this world, an attachment that may create in us an inordinate desire to acquire things, and an ability not to notice those around us whose poverty makes us uncomfortable.

I am drawn back in to the parable about the rich person who did not see the poor man outside his gates, and the relationship he was meant to have with him. What is contrasted here is a life of service set next to a life of acquisition, and maybe this is where the queen best serves as a possible illustration, because if you saw any of the proceedings then you probably saw the proclamation she made as a young woman in which she devoted herself to the service of her people. The former is a part of the journey to eternal life, the latter can never satisfy, and ends in disappointment and loss.

That is, at least, how the queen framed it, and the royal family says they understand their role, to be one of service. It is hard to say how sincere they all really are, but no matter, because the challenge of these texts is for *us*, and the question is about how sincere *we* are.

Do we dare speak of godliness and contentment? Do we even spend very much time thinking about them? Do we really believe that the life that is *truly* life is of a different kind than what can be expressed in financial terms or in terms of worldly wealth or material possessions?

Do we see ourselves in relation to those around us, those who have less, those who have more? Can we see ourselves as stewards of life's precious resources, called to serve?

Let us pray that we do, for godliness and contentment *is* great gain, and it is our only true wealth.

Once again I will leave you with a prayer from John Baillie:

O Creator of all things, I lift up my heart in gratitude to you for the happiness I have found today:

*For the sheer joy of living;
For all the sights and sounds around me;
For the sweet peace of the country and the bustle of the town;
For friendship and good company;
For work to do, and the skill and the strength to do it;
For time to rest and play, and for health and a glad heart to enjoy it.*

Yet never let me think, O Eternal Father, that I am here to stay. Let me always remember that I am a stranger and pilgrim on earth. *For here we have no lasting city,*

but we are looking for the city that is to come. Lord, by your grace prevent me from losing myself so much in the joys of earth that I have no longing left for the purer joys of heaven. Do not let the happiness of today become a trap to my over worldly heart.

And if today instead of happiness I have suffered any disappointment or defeat, if there has been any sorrow where I hoped for joy, any sickness where I looked for health, give me grace to accept it as a loving reminder that this is not my home.

Thank you. Lord, that you have set eternity so firmly in our hearts that no earthly thing can ever fully satisfy us. Thank you that every present joy is so mixed with sadness and unrest that it makes our minds look up to the prospect of a more perfect joy. Above all, thank you for the sure hope and promise of eternal life in your presence, which you have given us in the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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