

Sunday 22 September 2018

St Andrew's Church [8 a.m. service]

Jeremiah 11.18-20; James 3.13-4.3, 7-8a; Mark 9.30-37

Wisdom and Debt

Today in our 10 a.m. service we're going to be focussing on one of the social action projects the church supports: Christians Against Poverty. It's a truly excellent organization that helps people climb out the black hole of worry and despair caused by debt.

Just over a year ago, we did the same thing and the text for that Sunday was from Paul's letter to the Romans:

'Owe no-one anything, except to love one another' (Romans 13.8).

That was a great lead-in to a reflection on debt.

This morning's readings don't provide such an obvious opening, but they are still very applicable to thinking about debt.

The very strong lesson we learn from our reading in Mark, and from James' letter, is how utterly different God's way is from our way; how different his wisdom is from our wisdom. And it is following our own wisdom instead of God's that causes so much pain in our lives, and in the lives of others. This includes the accumulation of debt, which usually comes about through systems and decisions that are based in human wisdom, and so are more than likely to go wrong.

Ours is a world in which we are always comparing ourselves with others, working out who is better, stronger, cleverer, richer, prettier, superior in some way. And not just comparing, but also trying to be *seen* as superior, and worrying about how we are seen. It is a state of mind that infects everyone – from people with ambitions to become multi-millionaires, to people who jealously guard their lasagne recipe because they want to be known as the best lasagne-maker in town.

In our reading from Mark, we see the poor disciples bringing this way of thinking into their lives as followers of Jesus and squabbling over who is the best disciple. It would have been fascinating to hear their squabble. Maybe James claimed to be better at healings, and Matthew reckoned he was better at casting out

demons, and then Peter tried to top them all by reminding them that he had walked on water, albeit briefly. Some days I can't wait to get to heaven, so I can find out about all these things.

But in any event, Jesus quietly puts them right. He teaches them, and us, that while that may be the way of the world, in God's kingdom, if anyone wants to be first, they must be the very last, and the servant of all. In other words, we shouldn't give a second thought to whether we are better or worse than anyone else: we must just do our very best to love and serve other people. In everything we do, we must put aside any selfish motivation and simply focus on doing the *right* thing instead.

James in his letter seems to have learned the lesson well and he paints a picture comparing the different fruits of the two different approaches to life. With the worldly approach of selfish advancement, he says, come envy, disorder and evil practice. But with God's way of doing things come purity, peace, mercy, good fruit and righteousness.

Debt is a perfect symptom of how things go wrong when we follow human ways instead of God's ways.

If you track how any debt arises, all the way to its roots, you will usually find that things have been done according to human wisdom rather than God's wisdom. There are the usual obvious problems, such as the human desire to have more things and more pleasures than we can afford. Or there are the big problems, such as illness, depression, addiction, divorce and job loss. Or there are much wider problems, such as the whole way that our financial system works, and the cost of an economy which is based on consumption.

In a society where people were motivated by the unselfish desire to put other people first, where their main concern was to do the right thing by other people, can you imagine there being a problem with debt? Of course not. But just as human selfishness and foolishness will be with us until our Lord returns, so debt will be with us too. Debt is just one of the products of a world whose values are the wrong way round.

But it is a problem that as Christians we have to deal with. We must avoid it in our own lives, and we must try and help others who have become entrapped by it, and who are living lives of fear and hopelessness because of it. This is why I am so pleased that as a church we support Christians Against Poverty. It is truly an organization that shows the wisdom that comes from heaven, that brings peace and mercy in its wake. If you would like to know how you can help, please chat to me afterwards. Amen.