**Rich-can they get to heaven?**

**Amos 5: 7,10-14**

**Lk 6 v20-26**

Can the rich go to heaven? This is the tricky question for this week, and I think you will agree that for Christians living in our society, in a country that’s relatively affluent but also has huge differences in people’s levels of income and ability to change their circumstances, it’s deeply relevant. It’s also a question that’s not going to be solved by a one word answer, so if you were hoping for a 2 minute sermon you might be disappointed! But I will try to keep it as concise as I can.

So, where do we start? Well, I think firstly we need to remember that it’s not our job to decide who enters heaven. God is the judge of us all,

and our future beyond death is in His safe hands. So we don’t need to go about deciding who is in or out. I don’t know about you, but I find that very reassuring. However, what I suspect we all do is think about ourselves, and our position in life, and wonder if our income ‘qualifies,’ us for heaven or might put us out of the running!

And the first problem is that the bible tells us no set figure for determining wealth or what exactly is meant by ‘rich’. People are divided into ‘rich’ or ‘poor.’ And that’s because there was very little middle ground in the bible -you were either very rich or very poor.

But in todays society its less clear. Those divides are still here, but wealth is comparative. We know we are rich compared to a child living in a shanty town.

But are we rich compared to the man next door? It depends how we look at it, doesn’t it?

Personally, I find this question of whether the rich enter heaven a challenge, because I have been in 2 different parishes which could be described as affluent. By affluent I don’t mean people living in mansions but people who have had professional jobs and been able to acquire a comfortable state of living. Nice houses, nice cars. And in both of those parishes I have been struck by the warm generosity of the parishioners. The people in both these parishes shared well. And so I look at them, think what loving, generous people they are and then have to work out what ‘woe to you who are rich’ means for them. And that’s tricky.

But then, on the other hand, I love what the passage in Luke says about the poor. ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.’ (Lk 6 v20-21) It warms my heart to think of those living in poverty will be rewarded with blessings, needs and laughter.

And this is a revolutionary statement. Because in Jesus context, wealth was considered a blessing from God. If you had oxen, donkeys, land and wealth, it was believed that God had blessed you with it. So here Jesus is turning things on their head and saying, no, it’s the poor who will receive God’s blessing, its those with nothing that will enter His kingdom. Like the prophets in heaven, great will be their reward.

But there then follows a warning. In contrast to the poor the rich are told they have already received their comfort, food, and laughter, and they will go hungry, mourn and weep.

So what is meant by the rich? Amos condemns ‘those who have built stone mansions’ and ‘those who have planted lush vineyards.’ Is then, the message saying that you are condemned above a certain income, but ok below it?

Well, I don’t think so. Because if you look at these passages carefully, you will notice that they are not just about wealth but also about injustice and falsehood. In Amos, small farmers were losing family holdings to private estates owned by the rich, then being sold into slavery by heavy taxation to the estate agents who lent at exorbitant rates to the poor. Debt was prolific. So the rich were becoming rich on the taxation of the poor. And Amos’ warning for them is very clear-those things they have acquired by their ill gotten gains will be denied. In Luke, its more difficult to see what is going on-but if you look carefully Jesus refers to those whom everyone speaks well of as ‘false prophets.’ Now why would he call them that? His issue with them, then, isn’t just about their wealth but some sort of falsehood. And I would imagine the falsehood has enabled them to maintain their position in life, their prestige and their wealth. But Jesus can see right through them.

So, I don’t think the key element here is wealth, I think its how that wealth was acquired and maintained. However, you may remember the story of the rich young man who asked what he must do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus told him to sell everything he had and give to the poor. And when he was unable to do this, Jesus said it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.

So it’s impossible. Except that in the same story, Jesus says ’what is impossible with man is possible with God.’ Jesus knows all of us. He knows our capabilities and our potential. He knew the rich young man, he knew his temptations and weaknesses, but also his potential.

And let’s face it, we all know the temptations of wealth-the way it can become the b-all and end-all of what we do, the way it can make us be greedy and forget to share. It *is* harder to enter the kingdom of God when you are rich, because you have more distractions and temptations to battle with. Life is full of stuff, now, stuff to buy and fill our life up with. But along with that comes, I think, a lack of space-for ourselves, for each other and for God.

But entering the kingdom of God is not impossible. And a life shared with Jesus help us to see the blessings that we have. And let’s face it, the blessings we have in life are not our car, or our gadgets, or our stuff but in our relationships with one another and with God. I was talking to Hazel last week,

and she said, “me and God we’ve got a thing between us.” *That’s* a blessing! Having a thing between you and God.

So what do we do from now? Well, I think we have a duty to speak up for the poor. The poor still exist, just as they did in Jesus’ day- they just blend in to the crowd better. And injustices towards the poor are as prevalent. Grenfell tower had no sprinkler systems and no correct cladding. That wouldn’t be allowed in a Penthouse flat, would it? Why not? Because money talks, money gets you things, money gains power. Amos was condemning money lenders. How relevant is this today, with the increase in loan companies offering extortionate rates for pay day loans.

So what can we do? Well, if we have a tongue in our head, we need to speak up for our brothers and sisters in need. If we see an injustice, speak it. Use our vote for others rather than ourselves.

And however much money we have, we all need to share. John the Baptist said one of the most challenging statements I ever heard. “If you have more than one coat, give one away.” I know I have many more coats than 2! I don’t do what John the Baptist said! But I think the challenge is for each of us to share more than we do, perhaps to a level that is sacrificial and uncomfortable. So I’m going to finish with a challenging quote from Jack London, about what true sharing is.

He said, “A bone to the dog is not charity. Charity is the bone shared with the dog, when you are just as hungry as the dog.”

And remember, when it feels difficult, even impossible, all things are possible with God.

 Amen.