

22nd September 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: **364** **O for a thousand tongues to sing**
 416 **There's a wideness in God's mercy**
 153 **Break thou the bread of life**
 117 **Sing praise to God who reigns above**
 335 **Rejoice, the Lord is King!"**

Readings: **Jeremiah 8:18-9:1**
 Psalm 107 vs. 1-9
 Luke 16:1-13

"Balm in Gilead"

Holy God, break your word as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

silence

Listen to the prophet Jeremiah, lamenting over Israel:

'...the harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved. For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?'

Jeremiah's implication here is yes – there is balm, that is, medicines that can cure and restore – and yes, there is a physician. So he goes on to ask all the more plaintively:

'Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?'

Why then? Well, I think partly because despite the presence of real medicine, we are still going to quacks and false doctors, chasing quick fixes and anaesthetic instead of ending pain.

Today I want to reflect on the idols we serve today – one in particular that Jesus names as wealth, or mammon. Why it doesn't work to heal us, or society, and how we might dethrone it. What is mammon, why it doesn't work, and how we might dethrone it. But first, we need to get at what God's judgment is about.

Jeremiah is talking about a situation of grave disaster, a situation where the people have worshipped idols, and have elevated a pious religiosity above human relationships, and it has let them down. I want us to be very clear – it is not that Jeremiah has God punishing a society out of jealousy or capriciousness – ‘that’ll show them’ The disaster has come because the idols are fake, and make promises they cannot keep.

Jesus named one of these idols, or more properly, a whole woven net of them, as ‘mammon’. That is, wealth.

So what is mammon?

Some episodes in our history illustrate the judgment Jeremiah is writing about, and the seduction of mammon, with a tragic, desperate accuracy – like when, few years back in 2008 a scandal came to light to do with adulterated baby formula, milk powder padded out with melamine, and other substances to make it look higher in protein content than it was. The World Health Organisation reported this, and sought to expose and end it.

Babies who drank the milk failed to thrive – some had horrible kidney problems, and at least 12 were recorded as dying of malnutrition. Adulterated milk fed by loving hands.

The spokesperson for the World Health Organisation said it was ‘...clearly not an isolated accident, [but] a large-scale intentional activity to deceive consumers for simple, basic, short-term profits’. And how often it is, that the weakest in a society suffer because of the society’s sinfulness.

(Schlein, Lisa (26 September 2008). "China's Melamine Milk Crisis Creates Crisis of Confidence". Voice of America. Archived from the original on 13 October 2013.)

God, and God’s prophets then, and now, do not call us away from idols to teach us a lesson, or for some arbitrary petty jealousy, but because idols don’t work: think of all the judgments of Jeremiah as God begging us to stop drinking milk made from dust, and worse.

Remember there is a balm in Gilead. In the words of the old Spiritual, ‘there is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole.’ There is a balm in Gilead, to save a sin sick soul.’

However, we might try to understand that bewildering parable about the unjust manager, buying people's favour before he gets the sack – Jesus in his teaching that follows it gives us a pretty strong message about what that balm is not. Let's investigate mammon, that old idol.

'No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.'

Notice, Jesus is making an observation here – not saying to his disciples 'thou shalt not,' but observing 'you cannot.' TO do so would be like trying to walk in two directions at once – at best, you stand still.

And for wealth here, I'll admit I prefer the old word, MAMMON. It is a bigger, more searching thing, mammon than just money and property, wealth as we define it.

Mammon is more than money, or the love of money – it is the desire to possess and keep, the drive for competition as despising of those who cannot or will not compete. It is getting a sense of safety not just from having enough, but in knowing we have more than someone else. Or building our identity based on what we can acquire or keep. That is to say, getting a sense of safety from our status in this world.

So Jesus in the tradition of Jeremiah observes that where mammon, or wealth claims our obedience, that obedience we give to mammon will make it impossible to serve God.

And where idols are served instead of God, there we will find heartbreak. And need and division, and war. There the weak do suffer out of sight of the powerful. There societies becomes brittle, less resilient, there anxiety and division teach us less trust for one another in small things, and self-protection in large ones. Not because God is punishing us, but because we are drinking dust instead of milk.

Justin Welby, writing in summer 2016 talked about people who are drawn into obedience to Mammon – mammon is a master he says, who '...tricks them by playing on insecurities, on good intentions and on reasonable ambitions.' That is, Mammon like most idols imitates a good thing that it tempts us away from.

Again, ‘...mammon tricks us by playing on insecurities, on good intentions, and on reasonable ambitions.’ Like having good food, and a safe home, cheap energy - and enough money to help our children and dare I say it, our church, enough for the rainy day. These are all good intentions, reasonable ambitions. And of God.

And yet, Jesus told us, showed us - Wealth, or mammon, is not the balm in Gilead. Though it surely tries to claim, to take hold of us as the dismay Jeremiah spoke about took hold of him – and lie to us that it is.

SO knowing all this, I have an admission. I hear Jesus say this ‘you cannot serve God and Wealth’ and part of me still wants to argue with Jesus a bit. To negotiate a little – to say ‘Are you sure?’

Surely, Jesus, we can use wealth and money craftily, wisely – like the manager you have just told us about, reducing the people’s debts, giving bribes to get popularity – surely this is ok, in the service of the good? Except loyalty that is for sale is not loyalty, is it? A parody of love? What happens when someone comes with a bigger pay check?

But Jesus, I want to say - as one former British Prime minister observed about another parable also from Luke, which we read in this church in mid-July, ‘No one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions; he had money too.’

Really? As we remember, whenever we come to a parable, they are not simple allegories, but mystery stories – which in the end are not about our ethics or recommended actions, but about what God is like. And the story of the Good Samaritan, is not just about blaming the ones who passed by, or who we should stop to help. It is about who stops to help us, when we are in the ditch. God stops for us. God the most unexpected, the most surprising companion, the one we least expect.

Last Sunday afternoon a group of you were collecting at the door of the Barbican Waitrose for Hackney foodbank. It is harder than you might think – you handed out a shopping list at the entrance, with an invitation – one half breath of a sentence to communicate that we are collecting for the foodbank, and anything would be welcome.

Were I coming to shop, I have to admit I would probably initially try to avoid eye contact – try to walk a little faster – but most folk last Sunday afternoon were more polite than I am, and took a list.

Not all bought something for the foodbank, and many reasons for it – some very good. Certainly, stocking a foodbank is nothing without the advocacy that goes alongside it to end the need for foodbanks. We are about an end to poverty, not just an end to austerity.

But among the ones who did give, we saw real pleasure at the exit. People looking almost shy, to bring their donations – sending their children forward with them. As if they had done a little act of resistance against divided society. And they had.

It remains true that far from getting safety by bribing the people around us, we get safety from serving the people around us. And we build society not by being self-sufficient ourselves, but by relying on one another. We build the capacity for other people's kindness by giving them a chance to show it. This is how Jesus lived!

And our own capacity for kindness is built, grown, by others' need. And yet mammon still creeps towards me and tries to take hold of me – like Jeremiah spoke about dismay taking hold of him. I don't think these two are unrelated. And yet, there is a balm in Gilead. There is a physician: we do not have to eat dust!

This last Friday people gathered in a climate strike – children with placards urging us to reduce our waste, to conserve energy. To use less, to plan more – to consider not just the ethics of today, but an 'intergenerational ethics' (again, Justin Welby's phrase for giving future impacts of our economic habits their proper cost as part of our planning.) I would want to add, an 'international ethics,' that recognises that some of the smallest, especially island nations of the world – Fiji, Maldives, and some of the poorest are hardest hit by climate change. Some whose flags are up around our sanctuary.

We can be seduced by mammon in church life as much as anywhere else – mammon type teaching about creation has told us that the resources of the earth are there to be exploited, that land can be claimed 'for God,' as if God was not there already? Brian McLaren, an American preacher teaching at a Conference in Oxford last week that he wasn't sure the earth could survive another 500 years of this kind of Christianity.

Is there no balm in Gilead, is there no physician there? Yes, there is.

Jesus calls us to throw off slavery to mammon, one tiny step at a time, and instead to serve God.

Dethroning Mammon is the work of a lifetime – a habit we try to practice together. And it is the work of whole societies – it should be undertaken in the deepest humility, and with humour and play and a gentleness of spirit which allows us not to run at the first sight of evil, or even the second. This is strength. And accomplished only by God's grace.

So this week, it would be worth us each continuing our own conversation with Jesus, about how we serve God and deal with mammon. Argue with him. Not that I think Jesus negotiates, in the end. He will not compromise when it comes to your value - or the value of creation. But having the conversation, this is called prayer.

Jeremiah said, 'Oh that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people.'

There is a balm in Gilead, there is a physician here. The balm is compassion, is strength, is protection. Is needing each other and being needed. The balm is a right understanding of our own worth – God's love for us – and the worth of each other person – the trust that God is still at work this week, here in this City.

The old spiritual 'Balm in Gilead' goes on – 'If you can preach like Peter, if you can pray like Paul, go home and tell you neighbour the Lord God saves us all.'