

29th September 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: 88 Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
 161 Speak, O Lord, as we come to you
 634 Fight the good fight with all your might
 465 Guide me, O thou great Jehovah

Readings: 1 Timothy 6:6-19
 Luke 16:19-31

“Paying Attention”

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

To whom will you pay attention? To what?

Friends we are sat here many of us with more computer power in our pockets and handbags than the Apollo astronauts took with them to the moon, with more access to information, and more capacity to see and know the world around us than any generation before. And we have a parable before us about one begging from beyond the grave, this rich man, for people to listen.

And we are sat here at the beginning of another week of political anger, and threat, and rhetoric of violence. With all our access to information, we have great power to choose who we listen to, and how, we can with care. Our attention is valuable – so many trying to catch it, to control it – and this is a time when we many tempted into the wrong fight. Not the good fight, using the tools of love, faith, gentleness, (let no one think these are weak) but a fight for power, for mere victory, for idols of national pride, or the mammon of last week’s sermon.

Although this present public crisis feels new, I remind us that for the poor Lazarus sitting at any of our gates, crisis is not new.

And our Gospel today gives a hard edged account of a rich man who did not pay attention to the poor man, Lazarus, at his gate.

Jesus today reminds us that how we pay attention to the world around us is a life and death issue – a heaven and hell issue – and not just for after we die, but right now. TS Eliot famously observed that humankind can bear only so much reality. He was right – I get burnt out looking and listening to grim reality – people call it compassion fatigue. I have felt it, and confessed it – the desire just to pull up the covers over my head and retreat from reality.

The message today is simple friends. Resist. Resist all that would pull your attention inwards, all that would take your eyes away from the purposes of God in our world, all that would lead you to think that today's Gospel is just about the afterlife or about being a little more generous.

Jesus, in this parable, calls us to a Christian ethic of attention to the world. Paying attention to need, to brokenness – paying attention beyond where it is comfortable, and where the attention we pay begins to convict us in our sin.

We have the capacity for heaven, and hell in the world right now by how we use our attention – in this sense, we are all potentially wealthy. We are all the rich man. And our attention is a valuable commodity.

So I want to say, hearing the rich man beg Abraham on behalf of his descendants, I think it is important to pay attention to our forebears, that is, to our culture and tradition, to the scriptures, and to the world around us. It's what in theological terms is called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral – an affirmation that our reading of scripture is informed by reason, and tradition, and experience, by the lived experience of the people of God in the world. So – our forebears, our scriptures, our world - what might each be begging us to hear this week?

And having paid attention, how we show obedience to God – how we do those things recommended to Timothy in our first reading – pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love endurance, gentleness. How we fight the good fight. That is, to take hold of eternal life.

We begin with our forebears. John Wesley preached on this Gospel in Birmingham, on the 25th of March in 1788. When this Chapel was only ten years old, and when he had already begun to worry for its future as the culture around it changed: just a month before, on Friday the 21st of February 1788, Mr Wesley had reported in his journal that the Chapel Committee had met and had proposed two things that appalled him:

one, that men and women be allowed to sit together in the pews in family groups, and two that someone could claim a pew as his own. 'Thus overthrowing at one blow,' he wrote, '...the discipline I have been establishing for fifty years!'

All was not lost, however: Mr Wesley was glad to report just on the next Monday, after a weekend's reflection, that the committee had met again and after '...calm and loving consultation, judged it best...' that men and women continue to sit separately, and that none should claim any pew as her or his own. After calm and loving consultation.

Clearly, the culture of this Chapel was changing with the world around it, and as clearly, the Chapel committee then was still paying a good deal of attention to Mr Wesley. And he to them. I do not know when men and women did begin to sit together in family groups, and in general, in this Chapel, but clearly they did, and continue to.

Does this mean we stopped paying attention to Mr. Wesley – no. But because we take him seriously, we try to express the spirit of what he thought, not just the letter of his opinion.

So I take him very seriously when, in relation to this Gospel in March 1788, he said, 'it is no more sinful to be rich than poor, but it is dangerous beyond expression!' And 'stretch out your hand to eternal life!' That is, choose to whom, and what you will give your attention, and your obedience. Be aware of the danger of having power to act for good, and not using it.

And, with the voice of our forebears, we turn to the Scripture itself. Here, if I'm honest, I also have some sympathy for the rich man in our story – he was no worse than anyone else, it was the culture of his day, his upbringing that blinded him, that taught him the poor man at his gate was just part of life? We have no indication he was particularly nasty, or lacked compassion?

Here, scripture is our friend. How we pay attention to what Wesley called the 'standing revelation' of scripture is no less important than how we pay attention to our tradition. By standing revelation, Wesley meant that Jesus and his kingdom were revealed in scripture. Because scripture expands our vision. When I lead a Bible study, I inevitably ask three questions: is there anything we do not understand, is there anything we disagree with, and what do we think it means?

I ask these questions because I think scripture hooks us with the things in it that do not make sense – if we are brave enough to read it, and stick with it.

Makes us grapple with them the way the disciples did. And there is no getting around the fact that all the law of Moses, the prophets, let alone the witness of the Acts of the Apostles, tell us that God has a special affection for the poor, the widow, the foreigner. Expanding our vision. Like taking off blinders put in place by my cultural upbringing, by seeing the world only from a place of privilege, or only from the perspective of the winners. But it is not just that those of us with money should give some away – no – it is that the poor, the foreigner, holds the key to our salvation if we are rich.

It is me, in my wealth, who is in need.

I do not think Jesus' main point was any formal teaching about heaven and hell, in this parable, but was about exactly this – the importance of our attention and how we choose what to do. In this sense, we are like the brothers of the rich man, who are living unaware of our danger. Who are so in need of Lazarus' witness, that the rich man would beg Abraham to send him to them.

So we can pay attention to scripture even as we pay attention to our forebears. And certainly, we need to consider how we pay attention to our world.

I say this, knowing that our attention is today treated like a commodity – it can be hard to take control of how we use it, when algorithms decide what advertises or what politics we see, what news. It can be hard to use it in the way recommended in the letter to Timothy – with righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.

Our attention is planted, like a cash crop, is cultivated, is harvested and sold for profit and power. Our attention, if we do not use it intentionally, is caught and held and bundled with other peoples' attention to build a popular mood of outrage, or of toxic weariness, or of fear – and then called democracy. And I mean this on left and right – there are voices telling us with whom we should be angry, whom to blame, whom to beat.

So in addition to asking what is right, in public life, we ask 'how will it play' – in the pubs, and at school gates, and in the mix of places we live. The advice to Timothy is still good, still the seat of resistance: pay

attention with righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.

One high profile government advisor, albeit in temper, snapped at a reporter on Friday that the British public right now should just ‘...not to listen to the news, because it was all’...what comes out of the back end of a male cow. More scatological than eschatological. By which I took him to imply that he knew if the public started paying attention, his power and his political influence would suffer. This cheered me, that he would fear public attention to reality.

Paying attention to things which we do not want to see is hard work, especially when it involves our sin. But I am convinced that we are called as Christian people to keep our attention wilfully focussed on the needs of those of us who are poor. And without security. And without the consolations of faith. And discriminated against. And to do this is to pay attention to our forebears, and to scripture. But more than that, to pay attention to God in the world is to listen deeply.

Which, appropriately, is the definition of obedience. To listen so deeply that our hearts turn, our desires are aligned with God’s desire.

I give the example – stood in a supermarket queue, or in a crowded tube train – tired, frustrated, jostled – everything in the situation saying keep your eyes down, your attention inward – make boundaries and keep them.

If we hear the cry of a child in pain – that particular timbre which speak of immediate danger, hurt, threat – we will all turn towards that voice. Will drop our phones, and our bags – will turn towards that voice. This is what paying attention means.

Because God pays attention to us. To each one of us. And the more so where we have need, or questions, or doubts, or lament.

So my one point today, has been this: Jesus tells a stark parable in this passage in Luke, about someone who did not notice what was around him. Who wasted his attention and the chances he had to love God, and neighbour.

There's always the danger that we reduce this parable either to a lesson about the afterlife (about who will go where, and why), or to a lesson simply about economics (be good to the poor, etc).

No! It's about the quality of our attention – attentive to all that has gone before us in our traditions, in our culture, from our forebears – attentive to the scriptures – and attentive to our world. For only God can expand our vision.

Fight the good fight, that is the right fight (not the might is right fight), not for power, but for abundant life. Not with brickbats and bombs, but with righteousness, godliness, endurance, faith, love, and gentleness.