

**THIS IS NOT A SERMON – REV'D CATHERINE EATON – SUNDAY 11TH
OCTOBER 2009**

Readings: Amos 5.6-7, 10-15 Ps 90.12-17 Heb 4.12-16 Mk10.17-31

Don't worry! This is not a sermon. The parish is now relying on my insurance and preaching would be like the brickie's labourer on Workers' Comp building a wall in his own back yard!!

But I did want to come and touch base with you all, in this space between my surgery and the treatment, to let you know I'm doing well, and to thank you all for your prayers and support. I cannot begin to think how I'd have been without the support of this community. Your prayers have held me.

All I can say is I've been incredibly fortunate. What could have been, at several points, a very different prognosis, has turned out to be the best possible outcome for me. Given what so many others go through, and are going through, I've been let off very lightly.

Thankfully, I will not need chemo and will start radiotherapy next week. In fact I got my radiotherapy tats on Friday, though I probably could have got them cheaper at the local Motorbike shop! A big guy in leathers from there once offered me a discount on tattoos and piercing, but that's another story!

And I can now do this (lift arm) without gritting my teeth too much.

Before I went in, someone said, don't worry about modesty – soon you won't have any! She was absolutely right. I've learnt to dress to strip! I never thought I'd get so used to taking my clothes off for strangers!

This journey has turned out to be an amazing gift for me – not just because it's given me a chance to rest; not just in the wonderful people I've met and the fabulous care I've received from health professionals, friends and others; not just in the many signs of God's grace breaking through at particular moments; not just in the dark times which have connected me again with the deeper things that so often get buried in the busyness of daily life. It has also put me in touch with other areas of my life that need healing and attention – this is indeed a life-healing time for me.

While I'm aware this has put a lot of extra strain on the parish and particular people like Hans, Kirsteen and the wardens, I know God is with you as God is with me.

I found today's readings, therefore, quite confronting, because they articulate some of the questions which have been with me these last weeks. The readings pointedly challenge us to consider how we live.

The Hebrews reading is true – the word of God is living and active – if we can hear it, the word of God reaches deep into us, piercing our hearts, breaking through the illusions we have about ourselves, separating soul from spirit to find the deeper truth in us below the more superficial truths of our lives. The word of God questions and disturbs us and gets under our skin.

Perhaps today's gospel is the most confronting because it tells us the story of a man, not unlike ourselves, who is met with a decisive moment in his life – a moment when he is asked to choose between a short-term satisfaction and a long-term good. He is like us because he is essentially a good man.

We can distance ourselves from the uncomfortable words of Amos. He is confronting people who are corrupt, unjust and violent, people who do damage to the poor and vulnerable. That's not us. We're not bad people – we're like the young man in the gospel who keeps the commandments, who knows how to behave in the right manner, who maintains social standards, and who essentially lives a good life according to the rules of our religion.

But like him, we're often the ones who are deluded because we think this is all we need to do. Like him, we are also rich and comfortable in our lives, protected from the insecurities that face the poor, and often forgetful of our responsibility to care for the stranger and the most vulnerable of our world.

When the young man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus lists the commandments for him. "But I've done all that", he says. Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said "*you lack one thing*". Jesus gives the man an opportunity to take the next step, the bigger step to find what he's been seeking. Jesus turns to him, not with a commandment or a judgement, but with an invitation. It is a decisive moment for the man, but sadly he cannot take it. He is too bound to his worldly securities, his wealth, to freely follow Jesus.

Decisive moments come to us all. As Jesus said to him, so he says to each of us – "You lack one thing". Imagine Jesus here today, turning to you with the eyes of love, and saying to you, "you lack one thing". What is that one thing for you? What is the one thing which is keeping you from the abundant life which God offers? What is it you cannot let go, give up? What is hindering your capacity to follow Jesus, to take up God's invitation to life?

It may be to do with how you deal with your wealth, but maybe there is something else keeping you from the Kingdom of God, something in yourself, your relationships, your attitudes, your occupations. Chances are for most of us our wealth will be part of the picture simply because it protects us from the daily insecurities faced by those who live with poverty. God frequently asks us to re-assess our priorities. Where are our securities? What matters most?

The man went away sorrowful because he couldn't make the choice Jesus put before him. How many times have we turned aside from Christ's loving invitation to life? It always seems too hard, but with God all things are possible.

Perhaps the psalm also gives us a kick along – in v.12 the psalmist prays: "*Teach us so to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.*" As many of you would know, a trip to hospital and the endless waiting for test results puts one's life in a new perspective. The days become numbered and as someone said to me, each moment finds a new intensity. Looking at one's life from the end of it does bring new urgency to the question – how then shall we live? Seek the Lord, and live, says Amos. Seek heaven's treasure, says Jesus.

And it gets worse. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that one day our lives will be laid bare and naked before the one to whom we will need to render an account. Stripping off for strange doctors is nothing compared with that total exposure that awaits us when we come

before the one who gave us life in the first place. We need to consider our days and the wisdom of our ways because we will need to render an account.

I don't believe in the heavenly court which judges and sends some to hell and keeps the goodies for heaven. What I do believe in is the face of Love – when each of us stands before that gaze of Love which is beyond love, Love that sees into our very souls, and strangely, loves us anyway. There will be no need for judgement, for in that moment we will know in ourselves how far we've been from what Love has sought from us. We'll know how many opportunities we missed to extend God's love in the world, how many times we refused to share of the abundance we hold in our hands, how much we've allowed the build-up of fear to dominate our lives, how often we've sought our own security before the needs of others.

When all else falls away, that is the one remaining question: how will we come before the face of Love who is the home of all our longings, our hopes, all the things we strive for today that have no ultimate ground? No, there will be no judgement, for we carry the judgement within us.

For me, all this has found symbolic form in my little lump of cancer, a consolidated knot of things unresolved, shadows undealt with, tensions in my soul. Yes, cancer has a scientific basis and is connected to our genes, our diets, our physiology and the environment in which we live. But for me, this cancer has come as a question – what is the one thing I lack? Like the rich young man, I've also sought to justify myself to Jesus, "but I've done all that!" But Jesus has also turned to me with that unnerving look of love and said, "but you lack one thing."

Last week you heard about St Francis. Strangely, the book I took to hospital was about Francis and Clare. I thought a lot about Lady Poverty and how she seeks to make herself known in our lives. Francis chose poverty. For most of the poor in our world there is no choice. Poverty comes unbidden. We may never become financially poor but Lady Poverty will seek us out in other ways.

Perhaps for most of us it will be physical poverty as our bodies become less able, as we lose the security of our sight or our balance or our limbs. Perhaps poverty will come in the loss of a close relationship, a rich love catastrophically taken away. Perhaps on retirement our identity is suddenly gone and we are faced with the poverty of not knowing who we are in the world.

Francis knew that poverty, while full of pain, can also bring us closer to God. Suddenly, all we can do is depend upon the only One who will not fail us. But it is a hard call to make. The rich young man could not make the choice for the poverty that would bring him life.

And so for me, this healing time, this resting time is also a time of questions, of review, of listening and discerning. I ask for your continued prayers as my prayers will continue with you.

I know this has placed extra burden on the parish and on many individuals and I am sorry for that. Next week a locum will come to assist Hans and you in the care of the parish. You will do what you can do and no more. Some things just won't happen.

The most important thing to remember is that this is God's moment. I don't know how the next couple of months will pan out for me or for the parish, but this is God's moment and it is a time when God says to us all, "you lack one thing". It is the time for all of us, individually and as a parish, to reflect on that one thing that is getting in the way of our capacity to follow Jesus and to take up the life he offers.

It did sound like a sermon – but just a chat really! The Lord be with you.

Catherine Eaton