

## **Sermons at the Anglican Church of Luxembourg**

**Preached by Rev. Geoff Read on Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> September (Creationtide 4) [i]**

**Bible texts: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 & Luke 16:19-31**

In 2010 I travelled to Uganda: my first experience of the beauty and vibrancy of Africa, but also, in Kampala and then in very rural areas, my first experience of extreme poverty

Two experience stand out:

The first walking in the beautiful mountains on the Rwandan border and seeing in the soft earth the imprint of a shoe saying Ecco – from one of the millions of items of clothing sent to Africa as Western waste to be used but also ultimately disposed of

The second was being shown around a hospital. In a back room stood an X-ray machine, a gift from a UK charity. At great effort it had been imported, a new room built and the machine prepared for use. But it didn't work. On enquiring to the donors the reply came: we couldn't get it to work either. So there it stood until a hole in the ground was dug, the machine tipped in and the disposal problems had been successfully exported from the global north to the global south

There's lots to ponder for me in both experiences: can I offer them as a springboard for us to consider what Dave Bookless of the Christian environmental group *A Rocha* calls that most dangerous of viruses: affluenza

Affluenza: the dangerous attitudes that can flow from our affluence, our relative wealth, and that we see addressed in our gospel and OT readings: pride at our own status, complacency about the plight of others, and self-centred use of resources and other people for our own ends

Put like that all here, I am sure, would recoil from associating ourselves with the rich man in the parable, siding instinctively with Lazarus

*“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table.”*  
Luke 16:19-20

But the reality is that because we are part of a society, our lives are intertwined with a system of capitalism, in which consumption is not only encouraged but to which we can become addicted

We live in an unequal world. According to a 2018 Oxfam report, 82% of the wealth generated last year went to the richest one percent of the global population, while the 3.7 billion people who make up the poorest half of the world saw no increase in their wealth [ii]. The rich and getting richer and the poor and getting poorer.

The story of Lazarus and the rich man is a living parable of our global Society. Whatever we feel about our own relative wealth in Luxembourg, globally we are that rich man.

How can we avoid the virus of affluenza and instead develop attitudes and practices that reach out to Lazarus and address his plight?

For those of us who live in comfort, complacency is a special temptation. We can sink into a lethargy that says all is well, or at least not too bad. Meanwhile the environmental situation is rapidly deteriorating with huge implications for the poorest of the poor and vast numbers of God's creatures. The starting point for those who are affluent is to open our ears to God's voice and our eyes to the real world around us.

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 gives us a divine perspective on possessions.

Jeremiah is being held prisoner by King Zedekiah. Jerusalem is under siege and Jeremiah is unflinchingly prophesying God's coming judgement. And then Jeremiah's cousin comes to him with a business proposition. With the land already invaded he is being given the opportunity to buy a piece of that occupied land from his uncle in his home village. And Jeremiah says: Yes.

How weird is that!

In order to understand Jeremiah's prophetic action we need to know that Israel had property laws (Leviticus 25:25) which aimed both to prevent extremes of wealth and poverty, and also to protect family inheritance.

And so, as Jeremiah agrees to purchase a field from his uncle even though he is prophesying destruction, he purchases the land in a powerful symbolic action that shows Jeremiah's faith in God's future plans.

He believes that judgment is coming, and yet he also believes in redemption beyond the disaster.

From this we can draw hope. While corporate greed and corruption and individual greed are the prominent characteristics of society there seems little hope of ecological flourishing or the wellbeing of all.

But God also promises to renew the face of the earth.

In challenging economic and environmental injustice we can join in this same prophetic gesture of hope, working and living the redemption of God's Earth

But there is more here

Jeremiah's prophetic gesture reminds us of the Biblical view of wealth – there were laws in place to prevent the build-up of wealth over many generations. The Jubilee principle was a way of restitution: restoring something to its original owner, to its original condition and also compensation for injury or loss

Every 50 years in Jewish society debt was to be written off and property restored to its original owners

In doing so Jubilee was a powerful reminder that the ultimate owner of the Promised land is God. Jewish families were only stewards

So too us: we are fundamentally tenants, not freeholders, of all that we have

And in regard to the creation, we are tenants with a repairing lease for future generations

But there is more again in Jeremiah

Centuries later Jesus told the parable of Lazarus. And it is fascinating that it is the only parable in which the central character is named: a poor man is given dignity. Not only that: poverty is not "them out there". An important antidote to affluenza is to always remember that it is people with names and children and stories and talent and resources that are often in poverty that enriches others.

And when Jesus says '*the poor will always be with you*' (John 12:8) He is not saying – there will always be poverty so we don't need to worry about it.

No, He is quoting from the Torah: *"If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be ... For the poor you will always have with you in the land. Therefore I command you,*

*'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'* (Deuteronomy 15:7-11).

What He is saying is the poor will always be with you – so open your hands to give. The poor should always be with us: in our prayers, in our giving, in our decision making, in our social networks.

If the poor are not part of your or my life and ministry and our Chaplaincy priorities then Jesus challenges you and me – the poor should always be with us.

As Christians, we cannot look at the current state of the world, the inequality, the climate challenge, loss of biodiversity, and claim ignorance. If we refuse to accept our complicity, then we will find the hardest judgement of God. There are real challenges here for us as individual disciples and all Christian churches.

So how else to address the risk of affluenza?

Again and briefly, back to Jeremiah and the prophetic gesture he makes in regard to land, the reminder of restitution

Restitution is a key component of justice, which we understand as the restoration of right relationships between ourselves, other people, and our environment, in which there is enough for everyone and no one goes without, and the dignity of every human being is revered. [iii]

Our actions through generations have increased patterns of injustice, increased poverty and caused great environmental degradation.

For this we need to live lives based on an attitude of restitution, following the Biblical Jubilee principles.

For example, we need to recognise that often our wealth (from stocks and shares) came with an environmental cost, often borne by those in the poorest communities. A share in a coal mining company contributes to air pollution related health issues to townships. Likewise, our consumerist society has produced vast swathes of plastic pollution in the oceans.

Many churches, like ours, are involved with great love and compassion in acts of charity: food donations, winter clothes drives, Christmas gifts. Good as they are we need to recognise that these actions can be: one off, non-relational, giving of surplus, giving what the giver thinks the person needs. Charity risks not looking at long term solutions.

Restitution, on the other hand, is long term, relational, potentially costly and developed in conversation with those to whom restitution is being made.

Restitution, unlike charity, is: – “Highly relational; – Potentially costly; – Long-term; – Developed in conversation with those toward whom restitution is being made” [viii]

I wonder how we, as individuals and a church might develop lives deeply rooted not only in charity but also in restitution as an effective antidote to the virus of affluenza.

[i] Based on material by Rev Dr Rachel Mash, Southern Africa from [sustainablepreaching.org](http://sustainablepreaching.org)

[ii] <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2018-01-22/richest-1-percent-bagged-82-percent-wealth-created-last-year>

[iii] <http://restitution.org.za/> the Restitution Foundation