

**Sermon: 2019/09/29 (16th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C) -
Jeremiah 32:1-3a,6-15; Psalm 91:1-6,14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; &
Luke 16:19-31_BTR**

[Invite children to the front. Capture a beetle and put it in a jar w/ a lid.]

The event that the prophets Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah had been warning their countrymen - "the Jews" - about for *many* years was, *finally*, underway: 'the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem': [Jer. 32:2].

Like a bug in a jar, there was *no* way out!
They were trapped.
And the people were panicking.
There was no negotiating with the Babylonian emperor, Nebuchadrezzar.
He just wouldn't listen!
He was *intent* on burning the city down to the ground, and killing *everyone* within it.

Why?

Why wouldn't he listen to proposals for peace; for a truce?
Because King Zedekiah of Judah - that was the ruler of Jerusalem - Jeremiah's king - was a *liar*; two-faced.
He would say one thing to one person and then contradict himself when speaking to someone else.
He couldn't be trusted, and so Nebuchadrezzar hated him and wanted him dead.

Some of the rich people in Jerusalem, though, decided that if they could get enough money together, then perhaps *they* might be able to *bribe* their way out of trouble.

Do you know what a bribe is?

[Wait for response.]

Yes!

The rich Jews in Jerusalem hoped they might be able to give some money to some of the Babylonian soldiers trapping them in the city, who might then let them escape to Egypt or somewhere.

Now, by "money" I mean not credit cards, but shiny metal coins - of gold or silver.
And to get them for the bribe meant selling stuff.
Lots of it.
Like their furniture.

Or their homes.
Or some land...

But the problem was that everyone had the same idea!
No one wanted to buy somebody else's "stuff," because it would be a heavy burden that would prevent them from escaping too: it's hard to run away from a battle if you're carrying a couch or an armchair, right?

Well, one of those rich people looking to sell stuff for a bribe was Jeremiah's own cousin, Hanamel.

And God told Jeremiah to let Hanamel sell him his field, which everyone else thought was crazy!

The Babylonians had destroyed the fields on their way to Jerusalem: they had marched right through them - thousands of soldiers, whose boots had churned up the mud and crushed the crops.

They thought Jeremiah was silly for wanting a messed up field.

But Jeremiah trusted God, and so he bought it.

Why did God want Jeremiah to buy Hanamel's field?

Because it was an *investment* (in the future) - and we shouldn't just spend, spend, spend.

We're supposed to be careful with the blessings God has provided us, and look after the world and our wealth not just for ourselves, but for the people who are coming after us.

Let's pray:

Lord God, ..., in Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Dismiss children.]

Soteriology - from the Biblical Greek work, "sōtēria" - meaning "deliverance" or "salvation," is the noun used by theologians to refer to that discussion concerning, *specifically*, questions as to what happens after we die.

"Is there a life after this one?" For example.

"Will cruelties and unpleasantries be rectified in some way?"

"Will non-convicted criminals get their 'just deserts'?"

"Will my beloved golden retriever, "Fido," be there to greet me?"

Etcetera, etcetera.

And soteriology has *always* been a most contentious and confusing matter - that's both *within* the Church *and* without, (among the general public).

Just this week - on Tuesday, NPR was reviewing an author's latest book - a

collection of her essays, one of which was about a young boy whose family is convinced that he is a reincarnated Second World War pilot killed at Pearl Harbour ...or something.

Their evidence, which sounded a little "thin" to me, was that he has an excellent grasp of naval and nautical terminology, *and in particular* about aircraft carriers of that period; which, I concede, is a little odd.

And in Jesus' day - first century Palestine - there was a live debate *raging* between the Pharisees and the Sadducees about such things.

The Pharisees - let's call them the...radicals; they thought and taught that though we die - obviously, tragically - *all* human beings will be resurrected in a single, spectacular, earth-shattering - literally, mountain melting [Ps. 97:5] - moment, called, in the Scriptures, "The Day of the Lord." [E.g. Joel 1:15 Am. 5:18, etc.]

Then God (the Creator of everything) will 's[i]t in judgment', dividing men and women into two different 'nations', only one of which will survive to enjoy 'an everlasting dominion' that the Almighty Himself will preside over: [Dan. 7:9ff].

Now, you mayn't have realized it but that brief description of the Pharisees' soteriology I just offered you was littered with quotes and allusions to the *Book of* (the prophet) *Daniel*.

And he was, if you like, their *key* text.

And it was, by ancient standards, a *very modern* text.

Just a few of centuries old.

It was written during the Babylonian Exile - the Babylonian Exile that we hear Jeremiah describe just beginning this morning.

The Sadducees, on the other hand - that's the priesthood; an aristocracy of very old, wealthy families closely associated with the Temple cult in Jerusalem - they rejected those ideas.

So, let's call them the "reactionaries."

They didn't see the Pharisees' soteriological beliefs *explicitly* expressed in the *remainder* of the Old Testament - those holy, inspired documents written *before Daniel* - and so were suspicious of this teaching about the possibility of "life-after-death."

And it is *certainly* true that God's *soteriological* promises to the Jews had been, *in the main*, about their *earthly* existence; promises focused on a wonderful future kingdom just for the Jews: a kingdom *very* much only in the *usual* sense of that word - so a physical, worldly place with borders and castles and armies and so on - in Canaan, the original "Promised Land."

The Sadducees, then, didn't expect to rise again - not really.

And that *deeply* affected how they approached their lives:

This. Is. It - they thought.

Get *all* that you can *whilst* you can from *whoever* you can.

Wring out *every* drop.

Forget tomorrow or the needs of other people.

Forget putting some principle first before material gain.

Carpe diem!

This was their mantra.

(Not literally, of course - it is a latin phrase and they spoke Aramaic, but essentially - they would have liked it a lot.)

Is it any wonder, then, that the Sadducees tended not to be idealists but, rather, *pragmatists*?

They were after all the traitors who were engaged in a power-sharing arrangement with those obnoxious, pagan colonisers, the Romans.

They were thoroughly corrupt; always lining their pockets.

Ready to make *any* deal.

And again, allow me to reiterate, it seems to me that these *generalizations* about them^[n.1] emerged as the *obvious*, most *natural* result of their soteriology, which lacked hope about a resurrected fresh start.

And there were *good* reasons to think the way that they did.

Many of the prophets had predicted that the exile wouldn't last - like Jeremiah, and described that what would come after would be *glorious!*

Of course, the (immediate) reality "on the ground" was anything but.

But the Sadducees just assumed it was up to them to build that dream, which was going to come gradually and by hard work of realists and compromisers like themselves.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, could see that something was *badly* amiss with the current situation.

That is was downright *unGodly*.

Indeed, though they were home (from Babylon) *geographically* speaking, they could see that they were still *very* much "*in exile*" spiritually;^[n.2] that the vision of someone like Isaiah was *far* too stupendous to be realized by human strength and ingenuity.

And must, then, concern a much more distant time that God alone would inaugurate. **[Pause.]**

Yet what the Pharisees and the Sadducees were *absolutely* in agreement about was that whether there was punishment or reward was dependent on one's actions

- one's behavior.

That God was first of all a God of order and of justice who would see it done. It is just that the Sadducees expected to see those divine-given consequences more-or-less immediately in the here-and-now, whilst the Pharisees postponed them for "the Eschaton," the "End-times" - to follow once the Messiah returned.

And I mention all this because Jesus - the Messiah's - parable today about Lazarus the 'poor man' and the indifferent 'rich man' (dressed in fine purple linen) *must* be seen - if it is to be correctly understood - "in conversation" with both the soteriology of the Pharisees and that of the Sadducees.

Jesus was affirming - giving His stamp of approval, if you like - to one group's beliefs, and critiquing the other.

And it is very clear on what side of the line He was coming down on:

Jesus was, *largely*, affirming the Pharisees in *their* opinion.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, would have thought that the image He "paints" - of continuing life beyond death; of fire on one side of a chasm and bliss on the other - was laughable.

Many now would probably think this laughable.

Atheists and others.

But if we think there is *any* truth to it - any truth *whatsoever*(!), it should precipitate some kind of fundamental attitudinal change in us.

Imagine, for instance, that you aren't sitting in a pew right now but are at the horse-races - I, of course, as a priest, could never condone such a thing, but imagine for the sake of argument that that's where you were.

And you're in the line about to place a bet at "the window," when, suddenly, you hear somebody else - a stranger - behind you in the queue mention on their cell-phone, in a whisper, that they've heard directly from one of the jockeys that his horse, a past winner of this race - a "shoo-in" to win, in fact, is sick.

Not seriously sick, but beginning to come down with something.

Wouldn't that knowledge influence what you would then do with your money?

Of course it would.

Well, in today's parable, Jesus is offering us His own "insider's tip."

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Some obvious, glaring exceptions of course: Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus.
2. See: Garnet, P. (1982), 'Some Qumran Exegetical Cruces in the Light of Exilic

Soteriology', in Livingstone, Elizabeth A. (Ed.), *Studia Evangelica, Volume VII: Papers Presented to the Fifth International Congress on Biblical Studies held at Oxford, 1973*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, pp. 201-204, 201.