

Amos 6: 1a, 4-7; 1 Tim 6: 6-19; Luke 16: 19-end

Today's gospel reading probably made you feel uncomfortable, probably should have made you feel uncomfortable. It did me.

As an obvious starting point, this story – and it presumably is a story, a parable – is about a rich man getting his comeuppance. It is clear from other gospel stories such as the camel trying to get through the eye of a needle that it's not easy for a rich person to be a disciple of Jesus.

I want to approach this morning's lesson from the angle of what it means to live life well because apart from anything, Paul has dealt with the problem of money so clearly (and it's not often I say that!) in the extract we heard from his first letter to Timothy.

Now, we also know from Paul, that 'getting to heaven' is about faith and God's grace and not about works, but it is also clear that Jesus talked about behaviour and lifestyle and that these two strands of grace and works have to be held in a relationship with each other, as Paul recognised at the end of the extract saying the rich should be told to be 'rich in good works'.

Last week, had it been a normal week, we would have heard the curious story which falls just before this one in Luke's gospel – the steward who is dismissed for cheating his employer and, having heard he is for the chop, quickly goes round the account holders and knocks great percentages off their bills to create favours to call on later. Remarkably he is congratulated for his canniness (although I don't think he gets his job back!). It reminds me of the parable of the talents where the boss has to go away and leaves his managers with sums of money to continue trading. The frightened employee who buries his money, to make sure he doesn't lose any, gets it in the neck.

God expects us to do something with our life.

This week in the newspaper there was an interview with the artist Frank Auerbach, now 91, who has a claim to the title 'Britain's Greatest Living Painter'. He has been something of a reclusive painter, still going to his studio 365 days a year, painting from at least dawn to sundown, hardly ever leaving the area of London where he lives. He's not been one to give interviews much either: **'I simply prefer to go on working than to waste my time talking'** he says.

He says of painting: **'Painting is a mysterious process, and I don't ever want it to be demystified'** something we might also say about our religious faith.

I also found some of the other things he says about the painting life helpful in describing a Christian life.

'I haven't any great talent at all' he says, **'or at least I had a superficial talent before I started, but as soon as I began to realise what painting was really about it seemed to disappear.'** Perhaps you have found as the years of your faith have gone by that you don't have much skill for it.

The reason for giving an interview now is that there is a new book out about his life's work. He says, in reviewing his work, he wasn't looking at whether he had got better or worse but whether he has kept on changing, kept experiencing and responding afresh. He says: **'My nightmare is that I should find that I have done exactly the same drawing of different people. Materials and paints behave utterly differently every time that you work. Sometimes a pencil moves smoothly across the paper, sometimes it plonks down in a patch of scumbled graphite. It's totally unpredictable. All that matters is that something has happened, has changed. Even now I am changing all the time.'**

Even if you are not a painter I'm sure you understand what he is saying, you will have dealt with a leaky fountain pen or something similar!

What he is saying, though, is that painting, and I am saying Christian living, is not about having black and white rules to be stuck to at all costs. It is about relationships and it is about taking what you know, what you have learnt in life thus far, and letting the putting of that into action be done in response to the person, the activity, before you. PTO

He describes his daily activity as 'making heavy weather of it' amid the chaos of his paint-encrusted studio.

Likewise life is messy and we don't always get things right first time, we often make heavy weather of it. Frank Auerbach has to rely on his own discipline to take him back to face the work that isn't going in the direction he wants, or to face the next blank canvas. We are aided in our Christian life by the encouragement of the words of the prophets, the words of Jesus himself, and above all the promise of forgiveness for our wrongdoings so that they do not hang over us as obstacles to the path ahead.

A final word from Mr Auerbach: **'I am trying'**, he says, **'to put down as directly as I can my sensations, I experience what happens, what's in front of me, and try to make a new, coherent, true form of what I feel. I would regard it as a sort of propaganda or falsity to try to persuade anybody of anything, I just, in a dumb way, like a sleepwalker try to pin down the most pure, utterly new, utterly strange and true image of that sensation. If I ever achieved it, I would of course stop. I would think, Now I've done it. But there's always this idea of an impossible, perfect, fierce new image that I can't quite reach ... and so I go on.'**

I would take issue with his description of what he's doing as 'sleepwalking', it seems to me that what he describes is a deep concentration like we might hope to achieve in prayer.

The rich man of our gospel story has failed, I would suggest, because he did not engage with the world around him in a way that enriched that world and the people in it and through that world failed to **'try to pin down the most pure, utterly new, utterly strange and true image'** of God.

Being a Christian is about putting the effort in, about responding to all that God has created in a God-loving way and doing it in the hope and trust that God's grace will redeem us in spite of the times we make heavy weather of it and that we will, in the end, see the true God.

We must go out of here in peace, to Love and serve the Lord,

In the name of Christ,

Amen