

# The vanity of the lovers of money: Ecclesiastes ch.5

*Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you upon earth; therefore, let your words be few.* (Ecclesiastes 5: 2)

It's not the most encouraging text for somebody trying to write a Thought for the Day.

The message is that you should probably be talking a lot less than you are doing.

*With many dreams come vanities and a multitude of words, but fear God.*  
(Ecclesiastes 5:7)

It isn't getting any easier is it? It sounds like a truly spiritual person shouldn't be writing a *Thought for the Day* at all.

What about the rest of chapter 5?

Oh.

It's all about the spiritual dangers of being wealthy.

I wonder how other vicars of Alderley Edge have tackled that subject?

It seems to me that when you are comfortably off you don't have to be quite so humble in life. Poor people have to be humbler just to get by. So they practise humility and get better at it. Rich people have fewer opportunities to practise humility. They are more likely to order something in a restaurant and less likely to take an order in a restaurant for example. This is the spiritual danger of wealth.

Because with fewer opportunities to practise humility we fall into the trap of thinking that it is what we do ourselves that makes the difference. And so we ask ourselves, "*What shall we do?*" when the real question is more like "*What is God doing?*"

Rich people are tempted to think that their wealth is the direct result of their own efforts. They worked for it. There was no luck involved. God was not involved. Their wealth is theirs by right and not a gift of God.

And from there it is but a small step to blaming poor people for their poverty. Why don't poor people work harder so that they become wealthier, they ask. Why don't they pull themselves up by their bootstraps?

Martin Luther King once commented in reply to a journalist's question, *"It's all right to tell a man to lift himself by his own bootstraps, but it is cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps."*

And once you are blaming the poor for their poverty, you are but a short step from being a poor neighbour and having no love or charity in your heart. The values that you cling to in order to justify your wealth to yourself lead you into a spiritual desert.

That's why it is written, *"If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter."* (Ecclesiastes 5:8)

Bryan Stevenson, a law professor at New York University School of Law, is often quoted for having written, *"The opposite of poverty is not wealth. In too many places, the opposite of poverty is justice."* Bryan Stevenson is the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, both based in Montgomery, Alabama. I visited the latter this time last year. Few places of pilgrimage have made a stronger impression on me.

It's not even as if wealth makes anybody happy particularly. *"The lover of money will not be satisfied with money, nor the lover of wealth with gain. This also is vanity."* (Ecclesiastes 5:10). We've all met people who have plenty and yet are unhappy because they are trapped in arguments, they hope will lead to them getting just a little bit more.

So, wealth fails to make the wealthy happy and yet brings oppression to the poor.

How then, do we escape from the spiritual trap that wealth presents us with?

Actually, the answer is very simple. We must simply give thanks to God for giving us wealth. Wealth is the gift of God. It is not something we have created for ourselves. Everything else flows from this.

*All to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil – this is the gift of God.* (Ecclesiastes 5:19)

If we remember that our wealth is a gift from God, as is the ability to enjoy our wealth, we will enjoy the peace of those who have everything they need and the joy of those who are generous with what they have. And God will keep us occupied with the joy of our hearts.

© Robin Pye

5<sup>th</sup> February 2021