

Sermon preached at King's College Chapel, Cambridge

June 3rd 2018 - First Sunday after Trinity

True gold

Lamentations 4.1-5; Luke 16.19-end.

Not for nothing does the prophet Jeremiah give us that not-enough-used word *jeremiad*. Sometimes your sense of how things are can be like a fusillade of frustration and apparent negativity, like so much rhetorical lead shot. Or maybe sometimes it's more like a slough of disappointment, leadenly heavy. Both are types of *jeremiad*, and typical of Jeremiah; and both have the potential to be genuinely prophetic cries in the wilderness of human misery.

You're probably thinking that this is a bit melodramatic, even by my standards. And I must say as emphatically as possible straight away that life is *not* just a wilderness of human misery. There are so many reasons for joy and wonder and awe and gratitude. Indeed, the prophets of old knew this, or knew of its potential to be so. Even Jeremiah (Jer 33). But the prophets were like the clarion voices of Israel's conscience, calling God's people back to themselves, back to what God made them to be, back to being people made in his image. Sometimes, sadly all too often, the dross had (and has) to be burned off, purified away to reveal the gold.

Occasionally the Bible lets rip with some ravishing lists of precious things, riffing pyrotechnically: from its talk of the 'bdellium and onyx stone' to be found beyond Eden, to the dizzying description of the new Jerusalem in the book of Revelation. But these are rare flights of imagination. When it comes to beauty and *richesse* in physical form, the Bible speaks of gold: gold supplies a rich seam of meaning much mined by the writers of scripture. The very word crops up more than 500 times.

Sometimes gold simply functions as an instantly recognisable, powerful comparator. Job speaks eloquently of wisdom being more valuable than gold (Job 28). The psalmist sings that God's ordinances are 'more to be desired.. than.. much fine gold' (Ps 19.10).

Much more frequently, though, gold is simply and emphatically a thing of the greatest beauty and value; and as such brings out the best and worst of human nature. The extended specifications of Ark of the Covenant and then the temples repeatedly feature gold. This reached its apogee in the Temple (re)built by Herod the Great, which was said to have been so smothered in the stuff that it dazzled you as you approached, virtually blinding you.

This use of gold in the beautification of holy space was, ideally, an act of devotion. If God was to be glorified, and indeed actually encountered, in such a space, then it should be

decorated in the most valuable and beautiful substance available. Cost was not a problem. Indeed, the immensity of the cost was the chance to demonstrate the immensity of their faithfulness. And in their foundational stories they imagined God requiring this of them; so obedience came into it too. This chapel belongs to that same imperative, that holy urge to give glory to God in things of beauty. There is a holiness of beauty as well as a beauty of holiness.

Of course something of such obvious loveliness and value as gold has its dark side, when it becomes the stuff of human greed and even of idolatry. Gold can ornament a temple, but it can also be melted down and turned into an idol: in the Biblical stories, quite literally. And literature is peppered with stories of the perils of gold-obsessed avarice, from Midas to Smaug. These fable-like stories have power, of course, because we recognise their wisdom for real life. Human avarice is not confined to stories.

The prophets of old had plenty to say about the evils of idolatry, in which gold played its part both literally and figuratively. Ezekiel could see that this lay behind the great, defining disaster of Jewish history in his day, the Babylonian Captivity:

Their silver and gold cannot save them on the day of the wrath of the Lord... for it was the stumbling block of their iniquity. From their beautiful ornament, in which they took pride, they made their abominable images, their detestable things; therefore I will make of it an unclean thing to them. I will hand it over to strangers as booty... Ezek 7.19-21

But the real cry of outrage in the prophets, the jeremiads of the deepest passion, were about more than idolatry and superstition. Or at least, about more than idolatry understood literally. Idols supplant God in your affection, they distract your desires. Your sense of what is truly valuable in life becomes warped; and instead of being consumed wholesomely and vivifyingly by the infinitely loving magnificence of God, you simply allow yourself to be cannibalised from within by the allure of the meretricious.

But now listen to the prophet Amos:

*.. they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals -
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way;
father and son go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned. Amos 2.6-7*

It's not just bowing down to idols or worshipping wealth which shoves God out of the picture. The mistreatment of the poor and hurting and needy leap-frogs idolatry into blasphemy. This is about hard-heartedness: when I hurt or fail to help someone in need, I am failing God, in whose image that hurting person is made. It was to break into this

constant cycle of failure-and-reparation that Jesus came among us, giving us *his* gold standard: that it is all about love. Love of God, love of each other – indissolubly linked as they are.

The need for jeremiads has not gone away, sadly. The hard-heartedness which so taxed the prophets and Jesus is not hard to find. No amount of shoulder-slapping prayer breakfasts in your gold-plated quarters will distract us from your policy of tearing immigrant children from their parents, people you call ‘animals’. And we strongly suspect that it is the scrabble for profit which results in cheap, flammable cladding being fixed to tower blocks, social housing for the poorest in our land. And if we’re honest, each of us knows that our own hearts can get hardened, even if not on such a gargantuan scale.

As the need for jeremiads has not gone away, so the need for Jesus hasn’t either. His interruption was into a world whose shadow side was greed and violence and the refusal or inability to see God in the other person. He came to reignite the capacity we all have to love, and to love with wide-eyed and open-hearted acceptance of being loved ourselves.

To quote That Sermon¹ from two weeks’ ago: this is a love we should neither underestimate nor over-sentimentalise. But when that love is let loose, then we begin to build a kingdom whose beauty it is barely possible to describe. John the Divine, in that last, crazy book of the Bible, had a go, in his vision of the holy city:

The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth cornelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass. Rev 21.18-21

True gold, the walls and walkways of the kingdom, is a love so fine that it is transparent in its purity. There is at the very least a spark of that love in every one of us, and it is our life’s work to let it freely burn.

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¹ Bishop Michael Curry at the recent royal wedding.