

KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL



MATINS AND SERMON BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY

*“Unto whomsoever much is given,
of him shall be much required.”*

Preacher

The Rt Hon David Lammy MP

The Sunday after Ascension Day

2nd June 2019 at 10.30 am

Verse 48 of Luke 12 speaks to privilege: to the educated, to the wealthy, to those with advantages of all kinds.

In its original context it spoke to the citizens of Israel, who had the privilege of being the community that God had specifically chosen to be a blessing to the whole world. A light to the gentiles.

It also would have referred to all that the disciples had seen of the Kingdom of God in the life and presence of Jesus. They were now stewards of God's gospel of grace.

The disciples may well have felt they were 'safe' in the knowledge that Jesus was their companion, their teacher and their friend.

Similarly it is so easy for us to gather around us and protect those things that we think keep us safe and secure.

And yet the fate that awaits the disciples after Jesus' death is one of martyrdom. Their witness to his life, death and resurrection will lead to their own suffering.

As always with Jesus' parables, there are myriad ways we can apply them to our own lives.

There is the most obvious truth that those with wealth, with privilege and with standing owe much to the world that gave it to them.

But it is worth asking whether Jesus would have recognised the way that we narrow the focus of 'to whom much is given'?

Would he have allowed us to narrow the 'much given' to money, power, status and education?

Because through God and Jesus, it becomes possible to say that 'much has been given' to all people.

In hardship, struggle, suffering, and poverty even, not much is given by God.

But because God is a God of redemption, individuals and communities have often learnt more of God in adversity than in ease.

Luke 12:48 is one of those verses that has stuck with me throughout my whole life.

And this is not simply because of the robust threats of "beatings" for those who do not heed it.

Growing up poor, raised in a single-parent household, in the shadow of the Broadwater Farm Estate in Tottenham, it may not seem as though much was given to me.

But privilege is always relative.

I was raised knowing that I had greater opportunities than my parents, who had moved to London from Guyana as part of the Windrush generation.

I was raised knowing that I had more life chances than their ancestors who worked as slaves of the British Empire.

And when I won a lucky break to become a choral scholar at a different Kings – the state boarding school in Peterborough – I was raised knowing I had been given more than my siblings, my friends from primary school and on my street.

With an urge to retrace my roots recently, I decided to take a DNA test.

Both of my parents are now dead, so I had few other avenues for exploring my heritage.

I was excited and nervous when I received the thick package of results in the post.

Opening the envelope, I peeked inside, then removed the print out.

The most surprising detail was my 1% trace of Scottish ancestry, but the part I found most interesting read “Tuareg tribe, Afro-Asiatic speaker, Fafa, Niger”.

In other words, my DNA was an identical match to someone in the town of Fafa in the Tillabéri region of Niger, West Africa.

Fast forward some months and I was a hundred miles east of Niger’s capital, Niamey, on a desert road.

Sat in the back seat of an ageing Toyota Land Cruiser with the air-con struggling to cool the 40-degree heat outside, I was heading towards Fafa. The small town where I hoped to find my ancestral home.

To the north was the Sahara. The dessert roads ran for miles, with few signs of life.

According to the UN, Niger is the poorest country on the entire planet. But even here there were differences in how much each was given. And how much each could give back.

The proud men and women at the anti-slavery NGO I visited had agency, purpose and a righteous cause.

The young mothers I met in distant villages appeared filled with joy, happiness and love.

Even those with the least financial means in Fafa will have more to give than someone plagued by ill-health, abuse or misfortune in a land of relative wealth.

The question that comes out of this teaching must be: how do we make it possible to build a society which enables every member to find ways to make the most of the 'much they have been given'?

This is how we create a just society. A society of hope.

Luke 12:48 should inspire all of us – no matter our beginnings – to commit to a life of serving society. Of giving back in droves.

But there is no doubt that it should particularly speak to all of you sitting here today.

Those of you fortunate enough to study at Cambridge University are almost a mirror image of my distant relations in Niger.

While they are the poorest on this planet, you have the privilege of the best education in the entire world.

Those of us gathered here this morning have been given piles, bags and suitcases of privilege.

God reminds us that these advantages should not only pull us up, they should also weigh down on us as heavy responsibility.

Even the majestic chapel we sit in here today reminds us of this fact.

In William Wordsworth's poem the "*Inside of King's College Chapel*", he talks about the chapel's roof and sees it as a metaphor for Luke 12:48.

'Give all thou canst...high heaven rejects the lore of nicely calculated less or more'.

Wordsworth acknowledges the sheer beauty of this roof. It reminds him of expansive generosity - not only the architect who fashioned it - but ultimately of God himself.

Neither God nor the architect calculated how much to give, but instead gave everything to enable such beauty to inspire similar generosity for years to come.

Let us all take a moment to marvel at this buildings beauty and be inspired to repay our privilege - just like God and just like the architect.

The economy of high heaven will not calculate how much we will give in response to God's generosity. Instead it asks us to give everything and to give all of our selves.

Graduates of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge earn £400,000 more over a lifetime than students from non-Russell Group universities.

But what you will be given goes so much deeper than currency.

Some of you will go on to become Prime Ministers, run FTSE 500 companies, edit newspapers, become Archbishops, lead armies, start charities and NGOs.

God's call to you is not to feel guilt about this, or to abandon your standing for somebody else.

But as you rise through society - as you claim all that has been given to you – make sure you give others with less advantage a helping hand.

The great Christian civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Let us realize **the arc of the moral universe** is long, but it bends toward justice"

This is true, but only if those "to whom much is given" give back even more themselves.

Just as the white South African from a prominent family F. W. de Klerk listened to Mandela – working to end the injustice of apartheid.

Just as William Wilberforce abandoned his class interests to fight for the liberation of slaves.

And just as Keir Hardie fought not just for working men, but for rights and suffrage of women too.

Luke 48:12 asks all of us to do all that we can to end injustice, spread wealth and share hope.

But God asks most of individuals in privilege, in power, in position.

As we return to our lives of work or of study next week, I ask you to remember God's words.

Whether or not we call ourselves believers, we can easily become fearful of generosity if we think it threatens to take away from us the things we most love or enjoy.

The idea of the God who prohibits or limits possibilities, the idea that people who believe in God become less than properly human, boring at best or dangerous at worst.

Instead Christians must witness to the fact that humanity blossoms and flourishes when room is given to God in service to others. When we don't count the cost, when we are always alert and awake to the possibilities that emerge when we give of our selves uninhibitedly.

It is in giving that we receive.