

A Harvest Bible Study



A Word in time: Harvest, Hope & Justice

Day 1: Sunday

Luke 16:19-31

'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table ...' Luke 16: 19-21

Background

The writer of Luke's gospel has brought together a collection of parables told by Jesus. These are stories full of meaning about Jesus and the ways of God in the world. The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus stresses the great responsibility laid upon those who are wealthy.

The setting of the story draws on some images of life after death which were common at the time. These should not, however, be used to develop ideas of the nature of heaven and hell. The setting merely emphasises in a vivid way the importance of treating those in poverty with justice and kindness.

This the rich man fails to do and Lazarus (meaning 'God helps') is left poor and suffering at his gate. Realizing the error of his ways, the rich man wishes to warn his family. But the Hebrew scriptures ('Moses and the prophets') clearly already teach justice for the poor and people refuse to listen.

Even if someone rises from the dead to warn them – such as Jesus perhaps – people will continue to ignore the plight of the poor; this is not the way of God.

To ponder

- Who are the poor in your community, this country, the world? What does it mean for them to be treated with justice and kindness?
- At this Harvest season we are in the middle of British Food Fortnight and at the beginning of the Year of Food and Farming. Many who produce our food – in this country and elsewhere – struggle to make a living. What are our responsibilities towards them?

Image for Day 1:



Day 2: Monday

Proverbs 22:2-16

'The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all ... Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss.' Proverbs:2, 16

Background

The book of Proverbs is a collection of practical wisdom that teaches people how to live on a daily basis. It is full of sayings that are still used today in everyday life. It seeks to encourage people to be wise; to make the choices that will lead to success and happiness.

Wisdom, we are told, is rooted in a proper respect for God. This will equip people to plot a course through the many challenges and contradictions of human life. The rewards of wisdom are very real, even material and are to be enjoyed and shared in our life together, here and now.

Wisdom to be found in this passage includes the assertion that both rich and poor are made by God; the clever avoid danger whilst the simple walk straight into it; the cautious keep away from the thorns and traps and if you educate children well they will grow up to be wise.

Generosity towards the poor is a great virtue whilst injustice and oppression will lead to disaster. Far more important than wealth and riches is the good name that comes through being humble and kind in word and deed.

To ponder

- Are there people you would describe as being wise? What particular qualities do they display?
- What part does God play in your decision-making processes when faced with the difficult choices in life?
- What do you understand by generosity and in what ways do you seek to be generous?

Image for Day 2:



Day 3: Tuesday

Proverbs 28:3-10

'A ruler who oppresses the poor is a beating rain that leaves no food ... The evil do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand it completely.' Proverbs:3, 5

Background

Sadly many have had first-hand experience in recent times of 'a beating rain that leaves no food.' Farmers from Herefordshire to East Yorkshire have seen their crops ruined by torrential rain and floods. A ruler who oppresses the poor inflicts the same kind of devastation.

There is a clear contrast made here between those who seek God and those who are evil; those who keep the law and those who forsake it. It is better to be poor, with integrity, than rich and crooked. Actions speak louder than words, so if the law is not being adhered to, the people's prayers will not be heard.

There is no room here for a religion that is disconnected from lifestyle and action. All is of a piece and indeed the true test of religion is how it is worked out in relation to others, especially the poor and the marginalised. Spiritual exercises are of no consequence if they are not coupled with goodness, integrity and justice.

The strategy adopted to encourage such wise living is that of both carrot and stick; those who lead upright lives will be rewarded well and those who mislead the upright will be their own undoing.

To ponder

- Of course, the world is not filled by 'evil' and 'blameless' people but by human beings with potential for both. What could you do today to express goodness, integrity or justice?
- What do you know about the poverty in this country – in both rural and urban communities? Look out for details of the Poverty and Homelessness Action Week 2008 (www.church-poverty.org.uk/news-items/poverty-and-homelessness-action-week-2008).
- Is there a particular situation of poverty that you can focus on in your prayers and with your actions?

Image for Day 3:



Day 4: Wednesday

Luke 9:43b-48

'But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest."' Luke: 47-48

Background

Earlier in Luke 9 Jesus has asked his disciples, "... who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "The Messiah of God." Immediately Jesus warns that he will be rejected and killed and that those who wish to follow him will need to tread a similarly costly path.

We then have the story of Jesus appearing on the mountain top, with his face changed and his clothes dazzling white. He is seen speaking with Moses and Elijah and a voice is heard from the cloud saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

On coming down from the mountain, Jesus heals a boy thought to be possessed by an 'unclean spirit'. And, we are told, 'all were astounded at the greatness of God.' But in the midst of all this amazement and glory Jesus again warns that he is to be betrayed into human hands. But even his disciples did not or could not understand what he was saying.

Jesus is turning upside down people's understanding of greatness and they find it hard to accept. So he illustrates it by placing a child in their midst – who at the time would have been thought to have little status and few rights. "The least among all of you is the greatest" - and "the greatest" will be rejected, betrayed and killed.

To ponder

- How would you define greatness? Who would you describe as great and why?
- The disciples struggled to come to terms with Jesus' redefining of greatness. Why was that – and in what ways do present day followers of Christ continue to struggle with it?
- Jesus said, "The son of Man came not to be served but to serve." What opportunities do you take to serve 'the least' in your midst?

Image for Day 4:



Day 5: Thursday

Ezekiel 18.5-24

'A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own.'

Ezekiel: 20

Background

The book of Ezekiel contains the God-given messages and visions of the Prophet Ezekiel, who was one of those taken into exile in Babylonia by Nebuchadnezzar II in 597 BC. This was a traumatic time for the people of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. In these early chapters Ezekiel focuses on sin and punishment and warnings of further disasters.

God's people have been so faithless and disobedient that the remedy required is the extreme one of destruction and exile. They have resorted to the worship of idols; they have broken God's covenant in the agreements they have made with other nations; lawlessness and violence are to be found everywhere.

In an attempt to avoid their responsibilities, the people are claiming that they are being punished for the sins committed by their ancestors. Ezekiel is keen to reject such a view and in a rather long-winded manner does so; each person and generation has to accept responsibility for their behaviour and its consequences.

Thankfully, this message of judgement is not the final word. If the people will turn away from their wrongdoing there is the promise of forgiveness and restoration; in the case of Israel a return from exile and a renewed prosperity. Such a promise is rooted in the gracious love of God.

To ponder

- How easy it is to seek to avoid responsibility and to deflect blame on to others. Are there situations of injustice or suffering for which we ought to take a greater responsibility and what could we do to effect change?
- To repent means to turn around and face a new direction. Where is there a need for you to do just that?
- Forgiveness is not to be earned; it is a free gift of God to be gratefully received. Give some attention to receiving the gift.

Image for Day 5:



Day 6: Friday

Revelation 3.14-22

'For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.' Revelation 3:17

Background

The book of Revelation belongs to Apocalyptic literature; writing which unveils or reveals truths lying behind immediate appearances and events. John the Seer received this revelation towards the end of the 1st century and shared his visions with seven of the churches in the Roman province of Asia. Seven being the number of completeness, John was in fact addressing all the churches. The message to Laodicea is the final letter of the seven and is a warning against complacency. If the book wasn't written at a time of actual persecution, the threat of it certainly hangs over everything. The last thing you want to be during a time of trial is lukewarm or complacent. Apparently, the church in Laodicea is affluent and comfortable: 'For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing."' The 'truth' behind the appearance is that they are 'wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.' The call is to repentance – to turn and see things as they really are.

Like the writings of the Prophets, Apocalyptic literature can comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. Whatever is required, Jesus stands at the door, knocking; waiting to be invited in, to share in our journeys of discovery from appearances to reality, from falsehood to truth.

To ponder

- How realistic is my own self-image – and that of the church, community or culture of which I am a part?
- How comfortable and complacent am I in the face of the injustices and challenges that face my local community, this country, our world?
- Jesus will not force himself into our lives; he waits patiently to be invited in, to sit and eat, to walk with us as companion and friend.

Image for Day 6:



Day 7: Saturday

Amos 5.18-24

'Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.' Amos 5:22-24

Background

We have here the first mention in the Hebrew Bible of 'the day of the Lord.' This was to be an occasion on which the enemies of God would be judged and the people of God would be delivered and enjoy great harvests and victories. As such it was a day to which the people of Israel looked forward.

The words of Amos must have come as something of a shock. In his eyes many Israelites had made themselves enemies of God through their corrupt behaviour. For them, therefore, the day of the Lord should not be eagerly anticipated, for it will be one of darkness, not light.

What was particularly galling for Amos was the cloak of religious observance that masked the corruption. His is an impassioned plea for social justice and a reminder to the people of the social implications of their traditions and the law. Religion that fails to see the important relationship between justice and worship is not acceptable to God.

Amos was a radical and courageous figure, speaking out, often in isolation, against a society that had lost its way and those within it who wielded power. His aim was to rebuke in order to reform and to align himself with the poor and the oppressed in order to effect change.

To ponder

- The view still persists in some quarters that religion and politics should not mix; Amos would be baffled by such a stance! But how should the two relate to each other?
- The prophetic voice is often radical and unpopular. Is there a need for the church to be more prophetic in its utterances and behaviour – and if so, in what ways?
- How might you align yourself with the poor?

Image for Day 7:

Edinburgh Rally - 2nd July 2005 Over 225,000 people gather in Edinburgh to take part in the world's largest human white band around the city centre.



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