



## Take hold of Life

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

**Readings: Readings: Amos 6. 1a, 4-7; 1 Timothy 6. 6-19; Luke 16. 19-end**

“Take hold of the life that really is life”.

What do we take hold of with desire, and energy, and passion? What do we put our all into? Our strength? What is our vision, our compass? Where do we spend our time and money? What is it that makes us feel fully alive?

In our readings today we are challenged to consider that any life that we take hold of, that doesn't make space and consideration for those who are most vulnerable, is no life at all. We cannot avoid in our readings today engaging with the injustice in our world of the widening gap between rich and poor.

How might the injustice that Amos speaks of, where immense wealth and prosperity has been gained through the economic and social oppression of the poorest in society, or the challenges to those who love money in Timothy's settled Christian community, or the story of the rich man and Lazarus from Luke's Gospel, resonate for us in today's world? How might what we see show us the way to life?

If you walk down Long Acre in nearby Covent Garden on an average day you might bump into Andre Rostant, selling the Big Issue. Andre has spent years in and out of unsuitable housing. He tells me he has just completed an MA in Social Anthropology. He notices the life around him and the gulf of inequality in this city. He's just secured a supervisor for his doctorate - a psychological and social survey of his pitch in Long Acre.

Writing in the 'My Pitch' section at the back of a recent issue<sup>1</sup> he says; 'There are squillionaires, and shoplifters, beggars and bouncers, security guards, traffic wardens, street sweepers, fashionistas and people sleeping rough in the alleyways. There are tenants here living above the shops who feel they are being squeezed out. And there are very wealthy property owners too. I'm interested in how we all interact here in this shared space.' If you speak to Andre you will find someone living in that space, who recognises the gulf between the haves and the have-nots, and feels it keenly, who is taking hold of this life we are living together and wants to understand it better. And perhaps through his research effect some change.

In the recent "*Hungry For More*" report,<sup>2</sup> the Church Urban Fund describes the work of the church across the UK responding to real need and poverty in our communities. It applauds

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<sup>1</sup> The Big Issue, September 9-15 2013, p. 46 & online <http://www.bigissue.org.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cuf.org.uk/hungry-for-more>

the short-term response to the austerity crisis with the rapid growth in Food Banks, many operating through, or with the support of churches, that seek to alleviate immediate need. But it challenges us as church communities to turn that into long term help for underlying problems and an opportunity for transformation not just for those on the receiving end.

How do we make sure that desire to help and care doesn't disempower people? How can it become an opportunity for those who offer help and those who receive it, to recognise their mutual need? The challenge is to make this engagement, a place where 'those helping, acknowledge with humility their own need for engagement', where those who help and those who receive 'embrace their mutual brokenness'.

Our Sunday International Group, that we are starting here at St Martin's, will be an opportunity for this church to engage more deeply in that relationship. The group will be supporting foreign nationals from outside the EU who are homeless here in London with no access to support and benefits and will be run by members of this community. As good relationships are developed it is hoped it will become a space where guests and volunteers each learn the blessings and the poverty of one another's lives and change happens.

It is in the coming together across the divides of wealth and privilege and social difference, and in the relationships that form, that 'the life that really is life' is found. That is where we find Jesus, making relationships, with all kinds of people, bringing life, challenging the economic and political structures of his day, and releasing people from the unjust burdens placed upon them.

The rich man in Luke's Gospel is not even aware that a relationship with the man lying destitute at his gate is possible. He simply doesn't acknowledge his existence. His wealth and privilege has cocooned him from engaging with the wider social picture. Even in death he can only see Lazarus as someone to 'be sent' - to alleviate his personal need - or sent to his brothers to warn them, not someone for him to meet, to understand, to help and to find life with together. He has placed himself beyond a relationship. He has abandoned any sense of obligation and so he has placed himself beyond God's reach, beyond understanding and awareness, beyond action and love. He has literally cut himself off from life.

Luke's theme of the reversal of social and economic status expressed so beautifully in Mary's words of the Magnificat, is played out here. The powerful are brought down, the lowly are lifted up, those who are hungry are fed and the rich are sent away with nothing.

Amos has harsh words for those who are living lives of considerable luxury and are oblivious to the oppression on which it is based. They too have lost that sense of relationship. They have no awareness, or contrition, or concern for the way things are. We hear 'they are not grieved'. They have insulated themselves. There is no sense of obligation or responsibility for the welfare of those whose lives they are supposed to be responsible. He paints a vivid picture of their overindulgence and pampered lifestyle. Amos warns of judgment to come. They will be the first to go into exile.

In the letter to Timothy wealth also causes indifference, with those who want to get rich simply 'wandering away' rather than living the life of faith, engaging with the community. They have given up on the obligation to share what they have, in mutual care and compassion and consideration, preferring short-term wealth to the longer-term riches of community, of relationship, of responsibilities, of compassion and care; all the blessings of relationship with God.

In the exhibition 'What Makes Us Care?' running in the Gallery downstairs in the Crypt, it's the importance of our relationships with one another that photographer Kathryn Prescott highlights. She has taken well-known young actors and actresses and posed them as rough sleepers. Take a few minutes to look at it next time you are in the café and see who you recognise. 'Most people', she says 'are no longer shocked when they see someone living on the streets. Many people walk by without a second thought. I can't imagine a single person doing so if they were walking past a person they even faintly recognised from some area of their own life, past or present. These people living on the streets could have been friends you once knew.'

Being in relationship binds us to one another; to our neighbour in Covent Garden, to the person sitting next to us, and to our neighbour across the world.

And what about structural and economic injustice? We've recently woken up to the reality of Zero Hours contracts, and the insecurity and powerlessness that instils. Our high street retailers are being challenged to take responsibility for our global neighbour preparing goods for sale here. On Monday evening the Panorama programme *Dying For a Bargain*<sup>3</sup> reminded us of the conditions many in the Bangladeshi garment industry are working under because of our insatiable appetite to buy cheap clothes from the High Street. 19 hour shifts, poor and dangerous working conditions, with some factories

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03bvmyf>

literally locking their workers in. As one anonymous worker put it 'We risk our lives so other people across the world can wear nice clothes.' What is the difference between this and the injustice that Amos highlights? We have created a global village but our relationships and sense of mutual care and responsibility for one another haven't caught up with that yet. There is still a long way to go.

At the end of the passage from Luke, the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers to warn them so that they can repent. It is the first time we hear this call for repentance; that someone, somehow, feels responsible. It is sometimes suggested that we should see ourselves as the brothers in this passage, who have the opportunity to open our eyes and see the inequalities around us, and the responsibility to enact change.

The name Lazarus means 'God comes to help us'. We need God's help to place ourselves in that gulf, or gap of indifference, to open our eyes to the possibilities for relationship and friendship and change all around us.

God helps us to share generously, to receive forgiveness, and compassion. In community, in our encounters and actions with everyone our life touches, with all of our energy and attention and love, he enables us to literally 'take hold of life that really is life'.

It is where Jesus invites us to share his life. He is already there, enacting change, making friendships, lifting burdens, bringing life. It is the way of love. It is the life that sets us all free.