



27 January 2013
Septuagesima
Sung Eucharist
1 Corinthians 12 vv. 12–31a
Luke 4 vv. 14–21

The spirit of the Lord is upon me

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'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.'

On Thursday this week one of the most powerful women in the world addressed some of the world's wealthiest financiers. In what was described as 'a combative speech', the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde declared that:

'Excessive inequality is corrosive to growth; it is corrosive of society.'

She was responding, in part, to the Chief Executive of a leading US bank whose bonus was recently cut in half to \$10M, and who had launched a scathing attack on banking regulators and what he saw as misguided attempts to make the financial sector more accountable to the real, actual economy.

The realities of distributive justice are absolutely central to our global and national life as well as, of course, our individual lives and well-being: It touches upon the question: What sort of a people do we wish to be?

These realities are also addressed clearly and passionately by the Scriptures which contain a radical vision of social justice. In today's gospel reading we have from Jesus what is in effect a manifesto in which he identifies himself very clearly with that vision, the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament through the prophet Isaiah, which rails against the corrosive exploitation of the poor and vulnerable by the rich and powerful. *'The year of the Lord's favour'* for example is like a billboard or a catchphrase for a central policy of liberation which sets free and releases all those enslaved as a consequence of indebtedness.

For all our sophistication, knowledge and complex systems, we are living in a world which is only waking up or reawakening to the fact that money, (in the absence of robust forms of restraint or morally infused customs and habits) is not the clean, discrete and amoral force that we naïve market capitalists once thought it was. That instead of flowing where it should - oiling markets, facilitating growth – it has accumulated in piles which are very difficult for most of society to access. Those acquainted with the Hobbit might think of Smaug the Dragon sitting on his huge pile of gold – all in one place doing nothing very useful - when it could be put to use rebuilding a world and a kingdom.

The Bible is consistently sceptical about the wealthy and is well aware that 'money talks', or to put it another way, knows that various forms of what we might call 'capital' – cultural, educational, social, political, as well as economic, are very easily exchanged to shore-up and buttress privilege; Money, status and power are very close bedfellows. When this happens and inequality deepens, people live increasingly separate lives in their own worlds. The 'privileged we' can easily come to believe the claim, or more likely simply imply through our actions and choices, that we are indeed self-made men and women; that we fully deserve to be where we are, for we have made it by ourselves, by our own efforts. We become oblivious to both luck and the lottery of the circumstances of our birth, the state of our health, or a myriad other things which go to make up the pedestal upon which our achievement and self-regard is founded.

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Such a warped view of the world is spiritually corrosive and if we participate in it we will slowly, gradually become different people. But it is also dangerous for others, for the flip side of such a coin is that we come to see the poor as deserving of their fate, rather than as the biblical account understands poverty - a complex form of disempowerment, which demands our attention and a compassionate response - of each and every Christian.

The private and the public; spirituality and ethics; these cannot be divorced for those who wish to be true to the one upon whom the Spirit of the Lord has fallen, who brings good news, proclaims release, and brings freedom and wholeness to all. Amen