

Hymns: **443** “Come let us sing of a wonderful love!”
 159 “Not far beyond the sea nor high”
 661 “Give me the faith which can remove”
 “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the risen conquering Lord”

Readings: **Jeremiah 32:1-3a & 6-15**
 Luke 16:19-31

“INVESTING IN THE FUTURE”

Our son Tim loves American history and, with his wife Judith, is enjoying the holiday of a lifetime. His particular interest is the Civil War and he’s bringing his holiday to a conclusion (a culmination) today, this very day, by visiting the battlefield of Gettysburg. Tens of thousands of young American soldiers, supporters of the Confederate as well as the Yankee cause, died in that battle in July 1863. Many say it was the turning point in the war. I’ve no doubt that our Tim will find an appropriate spot to read out loud the 270 word address of President Lincoln in which he calls on all Americans to continue the task for which those soldiers died – to raise a “Nation, under God, [that] shall have a new birth of Freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Anyone who saw the recent film “Lincoln” will remember how that government of the people, by the people, for the people, went about facing its first great challenge. For “the people” would of necessity thereafter include men and women of colour. There were four million of them who’d previously lived in slavery. To give them their freedom would mean changing the American Constitution, broadening its scope, extending its reach. The politics of this great amendment were intricate and tortuous – politics always is. But the outcome was glorious. The 13th Amendment was lucky for some (four million in fact!) but not, of course, for Lincoln himself. He paid for it with his life. Another Good Friday death that brought life and freedom to so many.

We pause to remind ourselves in the fervent political debate of the present time, and we note that it is possible to amend the American Constitution. Its provisions were never intended to touch all cases or last through all time.

Abraham Lincoln – Honest Abe – thou shouldst be living at this hour, the world hath need of thee.

Today (September 25th) we find ourselves poised at a very special tipping point in Western politics.

- It’s the day after a bitterly contested election for a new leader of the Labour Party where something resembling a civil war still rages.
- this very day, a hastily-written book about our nation’s referendum decision to leave the EU, charges our Prime Minister with duplicity and sleight of hand, and the former Mayor of London with being a turncoat opportunist;

- on this day we find ourselves on the eve of the first debate between the contenders, Republican and Democrat, for the Presidency of the USA;
- and it's at this time that truth is being slaughtered, sacrificed on the altar of egotism and ideology. Meanwhile the public are being wilfully misled.

It's a good thing to invoke the memory of Honest Abe as we look to the scriptures for help in reading the signs of the times. Can the Good Book equip us to address a "word to power" at this critical time?

Let's start with the New Testament passage. And there we find another Abraham! What a picture is opened up before our eyes. Unfortunately, we tend to read this story of the rich man and Lazarus through the writings and paintings of so many artists – Dante's "Inferno" comes immediately to mind. It's been latched onto by prophets of doom and peddlers of melodrama. And yet this story of Jesus isn't intended to offer a guidebook to hell. Nor a cheap jibe at people with money. It's a parable and the whole point of a parable is to point at one simple truth. It's a story with a "punch line".

Just consider other examples. The parable of the Good Samaritan leads Jesus to say "be a good neighbour". The story of the Prodigal Son leads to the resounding conclusion that we must recognise the error of our ways and be ready always to turn towards home. And the parable of the sower, so beloved of those who have a fondness for allegory, is simply a word urging us to find good soil in which to grow our life. And it's with examples of that kind (I could have added so many more) that we must approach this parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In this case, the conclusion is simple: heed the warnings, follow the example of the prophets and wise men, don't say you were not made aware of the proper way to live your life.

This is a parable about the gift of discernment. Cling to the principles of generosity, compassion, integrity, fellow-feeling, before it's too late. The rich man might not have been a bad man but he woke up to the way he should have lived his life when it was too late to do much about it. He could so easily have differentiated the good from the bad. All of us must beware of the seductions of success, the flattery of obsequious "friends", inflated ideas of our own importance, the addiction to ideology of the Right or of the Left, and the worship of Mammon. It happens to all of us. Now. And yet this is the moment, in this time of our mortal life, while we can still choose how to live that life, when we should seize upon all that ennobles and raises us to the height of our true being.

"Father Abraham, send a message to my brothers." Thus spake the rich man who's now realised that he can't do much about it for himself. So his attention turns to his family. "Tell them how to avoid my fate. It's all over for me. I seem to have had my eyes shut the whole of the time that I was alive. But my brothers. They must be warned. They'll wander blindly into this lousy place if they're not careful. Send a messenger. Please. Someone risen from the dead will shock-start them, bring them to their senses, wake them up, open their eyes."

To which dear old Abraham replies: "Tough luck old boy. Your brothers have all the advice they need. It's out there in the public domain. Moses said it. So did Amos. And what about the whole string of the prophets – Isaiah, Hosea, Ezekiel, Elijah,

Elisha, Habakkuk, Micah, Joel and the mighty Jeremiah. They all said it. They said it loud and clear. We must aspire to truth and integrity in the way we live our public lives. We must show compassion for others. Our agenda must be dominated by the search for peace and justice. We must be ready for self-sacrifice and to be courageous. Those old prophets have said it all. There's nothing someone coming from the realm of the dead can say that isn't already staring them in the eye, ringing bells in their ears, blaring out the message."

The mention of Jeremiah in this long list of prophets links us to our Old Testament passage. Now there was a man who spoke the truth to power: "Hey Zed(ekiah), listen to me. The game's up. You'll never win this war. The Babylonians are going to wipe the floor with you and the outcomes will be disastrous. We'll lose our autonomy as a people, become a vassal state, we'll need a place to lick our wounds, and as exiles we will have to dream of home."

This may have been talking truth to power but it was seditious talk. It undermined the King's authority. It demoralised those defending Jerusalem from the Babylonian siege. So Jeremiah was thrown into jail where he awaited his fate.

Whilst he was there, as the story tells us, he bought a field. This was his declaration of faith in the future, his investment in a new beginning. The rule of law would return, despair would be turned to joy, there would be a rekindling of hope. The purchase of that field with all the legal details spelled out, is a firm vote of confidence for the future.

So there the scriptures have spoken. They point to the need for leaders with courage who are not in politics for themselves. Of the need for men and women who'll be brave enough to tell us the truth even if it hurts, even if it doesn't win them cheap votes. Leaders whose actions will engender hope even if they themselves will not be around to enjoy the benefits. Leaders who are statesmen and women rather than mere politicians – for a statesman/woman envisages the next generation while the politician is preoccupied solely with the next election.

When I was in Norfolk Virginia, I came across a lovely museum in which I found the original manuscript of a prayer by General MacArthur, the great American general who commanded his country's forces in the South Pacific at the conclusion of the Second World War. He wrote a prayer for his son. It's a lovely prayer and I've often prayed it for my own sons. But, as I looked at it while preparing this sermon, it appeared to me that we could substitute the word "leader" for the word son and I could legitimately conclude my sermon in the words of the old general. So here it is:

Give us leaders, O Lord,
who will be strong enough to know when they are weak,
and brave enough to face themselves when they are afraid;
who will be proud and unbending in honest defeat,
and humble and gentle in victory.

Give us leaders, O Lord,
whose wishes will not take the place of deeds;
who will know Thee

and that to know themselves is the foundation stone of knowledge.

Lead them, we pray,
not in the path of ease and comfort,
but under the stress and spur of difficulties and challenge.
Here, let them learn to stand up in the storm;
here, let them learn compassion for those who fail.

Build us leaders, O Lord,
whose hearts will be clear,
whose goals will be high;
who will master themselves before they seek to master others,
who will reach into the future,
yet never forget the past.

And after all these things are theirs, add, I pray,
enough of a sense of humour so that
they may always be serious yet never take themselves too seriously.

Give them humility so that
they may always remember the simplicity of true greatness;
the open mind of true wisdom,
the meekness of true strength.

Then we who follow will dare to whisper, "we did not vote for them in vain."

Isn't that a great word? I think of it now since yesterday was my son's birthday. I can see him now in my mind's eye soaking up the atmosphere at Gettysburg. This is the first day of another year he's about to begin. What do I want for him and his generation? What kind of leaders can we build to take us through these bewildering times and into the day that lie ahead? Men and women who'll invest in the future, that's what. And who'll stand up for truth in a world that turns it back on it.

May God help us. Amen