

ThanksGiving Sunday – 12th October 2008

Leicester Cathedral 2008

The game of Monopoly was first published in the early 1900s by a Quaker, Elizabeth Magie Phillips of Clarendon, Virginia. It was a time of rampant capitalism and acquisitiveness, and the author of the game was trying to test then current theories about the workings of capitalism, and in particular the nature of debt. Within a generation the nature of debt had become a very painful reality, not just a game. Many were out of work, short of food, living in destitution. But the game remains the most popular in the world, it being easier to relish the fantasy of large winnings than to savour the bitter fruits of bankruptcy. And we continue to enjoy both the fantasy of easy wealth (lottery tickets being far easier to purchase than savings stamps), and also the increasing standard of living brought about by the trade based on usury and indebtedness. Or we did. And to propose that society should be based on any other relation than between debtor and creditor is regarded as sheer idealism, or aggressive socialism. Or it did.

But then came the credit crunch, and the rapid rise in commodity prices, and so the loss of confidence in Western financial systems, and the loss of confidence in the US economy, and the beginnings of loss of confidence in the significance of consumerism.

And we are faced with profound questions.

And our readings offer us, if not answers, at least texts which suddenly have a powerful new impact. Take the reading from the book of Deuteronomy.

Chapter 8 is part of Moses' speech to the people of Israel. The text is dominated by the threat of forgetting and the urgency of remembering.

The people of Israel are in the wilderness. Forty years in the wilderness is a long time. Clothes become tattered. Feet become sore. But that wasn't in fact how it was experienced....because the wilderness is not what it seemed to be.

Israel was reduced to extreme vulnerability and total dependence by being placed in a circumstance where none of its own resources were adequate. It was not even able to carry enough bread for the journey. The humbling was to permit Israel to recognise that it was not self-sufficient, could not manage its own way, and therefore could not pretend that it was in charge of its own life.

But having learnt of its own inadequacy, the people promptly learnt of Yahweh's generous adequacy. This is the creator God who can turn chaos into creation and inadequacy into superabundance. And so, in contrast to the 'bread of affliction' supplied by Pharaoh, the gift of manna was bread they had never seen, could not explain, and were never to possess. The wilderness had seemed to be a resourceless, anti-life place. In fact it was a place of safety, of well being, because it was a place where Yahweh presided.

But now a new generation waited on the boundary of the river Jordan ready to enter the Promised Land. The description of that land is obviously the fantasy of those who have had forty years to dream dreams and see visions of what the best possible homecoming would be like. It will be a land with lots of water, and lots of produce, and lots of bread. And again, Yahweh will preside.

But Moses is anxious: anxious that the new circumstances will not produce the same glad response of gratitude. Gifts given in vulnerability do produce gratitude. The crisis reflected in the text is that gifts given in abundance to the satiated may not produce trusting gratitude, but rather complacent self-congratulation. A gift kept long enough begins to be seen like a possession. And the giver is forgotten. And Moses knows that.

'For the Lord your God is bringing you into the Land...When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord.....Be careful you do not forget the Lord.....otherwise when you eat and are satisfied, you will forget the Lord your God...you may say to your self 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me' But remember the Lord your God'.

The repeated admonition to remember shows that remembering is in jeopardy. Moses knows that Israel will soon imagine that its own power, and not the limitless power of Yahweh, have given this abundance. And in amnesia, in forgetting, lies ruin.

This has a powerful relevance at harvest time in the 21st century. Environmentalists have reminded our own generation of the need, as Moses said, to take heed. Land, which is cared for as gift, is inexhaustible in its productive capacity. Land that is used exploitatively, as though it were simply a commodity, is eventually exhausted, and incapable of productivity. Exploited land, even if it was initially promised, becomes land under a curse.

And it is not just in our ecological but in our in our economic climate in the 21st century, that the words have a poignancy.

Grandparents who lived through World War 2 are anxious about youngsters who have no memory of hard times but live carelessly on credit, without imagining that there are limits and costs.

Migrant communities who have come to this part of the country in great hardship are anguished when a later generation no longer remembers the sacrifices and dislocation of emigration, and prizes independence over interdependence.

And Moses' words to all of us are stark: listen, or die.

In the end, Israel didn't listen. And the land was lost, and along with it wealth, and freedom, and identity.

This summer's Lambeth conference has brought stories which provide glimpses of God's promised land. Glimpses not of hoarded wealth, or hedge funds, or short trading, but of human relating at its most profound, of generosity and sacrifice.

An English bishop has written of one such glimpse:

There is a man...I do not know his name...whom I met briefly in the iron hut where a friend of his lived on the outskirts of Bulawayo. He was part of a congregation gathered for a house Eucharist while I was visiting Zimbabwe. His legs had to be amputated and a sat through the service in an old wheelchair. At the need of the service there was some conversation in Ndebele which I did not understand, and they took a collection. The man said something, and it was explained to me that he was saying he was sorry had only 3 cents to put in. Then they

came and gave me the money. My interpreter said 'They are saying that as you have been away from your children for a long time. When you get home, you should buy them some sweets with this money'.

Remember the Lord your God, for the good land he has given you. Remember, and do not forget.