

Sunday 28 Year B

13th/14th October, 2018

## The Root of All Evil

Until this week I had never heard of Patisserie Valerie but this cakes and confections company, founded in 1926, has experienced a meteoric rise in fortunes in the past decade. This week, however, the Financial Conduct Authority found what was described as a very significant ‘black hole’ in its finances and accounts which led to both the suspension of its Chief Financial Officer and an order from HMRC for the company to be wound up, suggesting the possibility of massive financial fraud.

This story came in a week when a woman appeared in court in the first case brought under new anti-corruption legislation after she spent £16 million in Harrods. She lives in a £15 million house in Knightsbridge and owns a Berkshire golf course. The fact that her husband is an Azerbaijani banker has raised concerns that the couple could, allegedly, be using London to launder ill-gotten gains from corrupt practices in their own country.

What unites both these stories is money, lots of it. We hear similar stories from all over the world about how money corrupts people in high places so that politicians and others who oversee government and justice in too many countries can be bought by the wealthy. This enables them to manipulate, for their own continued enrichment, laws and regulations that are designed for the protection of the common good. This collusion between wealth and power frequently rides roughshod over the rights of ordinary men, women and children and denies justice to the weak and powerless. All too often it is the poor who end up footing the bill and suffering the consequences of the illegal privileges of the wealthy and corrupt.

St Paul writes “The love of money is the root of all evil” and I think he has a case. Certainly, in the Gospel today, Jesus sees a young man’s great wealth as the single obstacle preventing him from obtaining eternal life. He is clearly a very good man who has kept all the commandments from his youth. This is no idle boast since Jesus does not dispute it and looks on the man with love. However, when it comes to the crunch it seems that he is unable to sacrifice money in favour of God for that is what his choice comes down to. We hear that he went away sad for he was a man of great wealth.

I once took Holy Communion to an elderly infirm couple every First Friday. They were delightful and kind and very grateful. They would often speak about their only son of whom they were proud. I never saw him though he seemed to visit and did a few small jobs for them. One evening I had a phone call from the wife to say her husband had taken a turn for the worse and the ambulance was on its way, could I come quickly and give him the last rites? I got there just in the nick of time, arriving with the ambulance. The crew very kindly allowed me to give the man absolution and anoint him before he was whisked away.

The next morning he died in hospital and I went round to see the widow the same afternoon. Naturally she was very upset and was crying uncontrollably. I tried to comfort her and when she was able to speak she told me that her tears were not so much for her husband. They both knew that the death of one or the other of them could not be far away and they discussed it often. “No”, she said, “the loss of my Bill is bad enough, but what has really hurt me is my son. He and the wife were round here as soon as I told them the news and almost the first thing he said to me was “how much has he left me?” I was so shocked I couldn’t speak at first, and then I lost my temper and threw them out of the house. His last words were “Is that all the gratitude I get for all I’ve done for you?”

Jesus’ condemnation of wealth, I think, is precisely because of the way it can corrupt people and so completely distort their values that it becomes more important than anything, even the love of one’s parents. For some it becomes their god, replacing the One True God in their hierarchy of values. This is why Jesus says elsewhere that you cannot love both God and money.

Of course, money and wealth are not bad things in themselves. We all need an income to survive and provide a decent standard of living for our loved ones. A little extra to enjoy life is no bad thing either, and a ready willingness to share from what we have with those less fortunate than us is an essential part of a healthy attitude towards money. It is important to keep a balance. Money is a good servant but a bad master it is said, and I think that is the right perspective. As usual, St Paul has a very wise take on the place of money in our lives. In the First Letter to Timothy he writes:

We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it; but as long as we have food and clothing, let us be content with that. People who long to be rich are

a prey to temptation; they get trapped into all sorts of foolish and dangerous ambitions which eventually plunge them into ruin and destruction. "The love of money is the root of all evils" and there are some who, pursuing it, have wandered away from the faith, and so given their souls any number of fatal wounds. (1 Timothy 6:7-10)