

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

Pleonexia. It has quite a ring to it. And while it sounds like some new wonder drug, pleonexia is actually the guiding thread that joins our lectionary readings together. In some ways pleonexia is a drug, for like drugs it can create addiction. And once enjoyed, pleonexia is hard to forsake. Also like modern medications, pleonexia is hugely expensive. So what is pleonexia? Well, basically it means desire for more. For a diagnosis of contemporary pleonexia I recommend you read the book *Afluenta* that accompanied a PBS series many years ago. Its a rollicking great read, and provides an interesting cultural commentary on the quest for more. Pleonexia is the only vice that St Paul describes as idolatrous, worse even than fornication, or evil desire. And it is the Greek word behind what we heard translated this morning as greed.

One of the ironies about biblical interpretation is that while the bible says quite a lot about greed and social injustice, churches have historically neglected those topics. In this country the context of New England Puritanism has conspired to direct attention away from social questions and towards individual morality. By contrast, the experience of Judaism has been much more socially concerned. Jesus himself grew up and taught within the Hebrew traditions of social justice, a perspective that is very much in evidence in our Gospel reading.

One of the traditions that still informs contemporary Jewish belief and practice is connected to the biblical concern for social justice. If you like it is the antidote to pleonexia. And it is the Hebrew word *tzedakah*. Like many biblical words it

has no exact English translation. While it can be translated as charity, the concept behind *tzedakah* is more about obeying the divine injunction to create justice. Charity implies for us something that we might like to do, and which if we do we can think well of ourselves. By contrast, *tzedakah* is a generosity to others that isn't optional, its what you must do as part of keeping God's commandments.

Originally *tzedakah* required that landowners set aside part of their land for those with nothing. It was land that was deliberately allowed to bear fruit, but which was left for the poor to gather in for themselves. The purpose behind *tzedakah* is a little like the purpose behind social security; a portion is set aside from those who labor for those who no longer labor. Moses Maimonides the great eleventh century rabbi and philosopher listed eight levels of *tzedakah*. The least generous form of *tzedakah* was given to those who gave unwillingly, while the highest form of *tzedakah* is an act of giving that is so generous that the recipient need never depend on charity again.

One of the things that never ceases to amaze me as a relative newcomer to this country is the generosity of its citizens. Statistically Americans are amongst the most generous givers in the world, giving a far greater proportion of their wealth away than their European cousins. And yet, when it comes to providing public social services, like equal access to education, we live in a country of massive economic inequalities. For some reason, while its individuals are generous, American governments of whatever political color, have largely steered clear of questions of economic justice.

The task of a follower of Christ in all this is relatively simple, especially at a time when candidates and parties are

strutting the sidewalks looking for New Hampshire votes. As part of showing our faith to be a truly living faith, we are asked to work towards forms of corporate and individual *tzedakah* of our own.

I don't believe that God has anything against wealth. Wealth in the bible is not an evil, it is a social good. Wealth ensures that people have what they need to live. What the scriptures rail against time after time is not wealth *per se*, but where the accumulation of riches has been done at the expense of the poor. When a tiny minority of society has the vast majority of the common wealth that is a cause for divine concern. And it should be cause for concern for us as well.

Whether we are wealthy or not Ecclesiastes is quick to remind us that we all die. All ultimately is vanity. It is a sobering thought, and not an entirely pleasant one. But it is the truth. A truth that we spend much of our lives trying to avoid, but nonetheless a truth each of us will face.

In the face of certain mortality Jesus encourages us to concentrate less on our treasure here on earth and more on being rich toward God. St Paul echoes Jesus in redirecting the language of wealth away from commodities and towards the experience of faith. And so for Paul true wealth is found in the word of Christ dwelling in us.

One of the problems of some of the old debates between free market capitalists and socialists is that all of the discussion ends up being about capital. By contrast, the Christian approach to wealth has always been to talk about God and the justice of God, the *tzedakah* of God. To those whom much has been given, much is required. And for those who are poor, the smallest gift can be a fortune.

The justice of God requires that each one of us learn to see the enormity of our wealth however little or much we have. And whatever our means, if we are to enjoy the riches of our faith, we will do so far better with more *tzedakah* and less pleonexia.

One of the fascinating things some evolutionary biologists have thought about are the implications of altruism. While one might think that the altruistic are more likely to be taken advantage of, some of the most prominent evolutionary thinkers have argued that those who give much away actually stand to receive much more on an evolutionary level. In other words, far from hurting us, altruism and generosity from a strictly scientific point of view, have been seen as life-enhancing and life-extending.

Confronted with this evidence there are of course those who will argue that anyone who gives to others is simply trying to advance their own agenda. And of course that may well be true. Giving can create a relationship of dependence. The challenge for all of us is to realize that we are already in that relationship of dependence. We have already been given all by the God who breathed and called us into being. And God does have an agenda. But all God requires in return is that we seek to do justice to one another and to those in need. Forgiven and forgiving let us seek justice for the sake of Christ. And whatever injustices we have suffered or committed in previous times, let us radiate God's love and truth in both our words and deeds. Amen.