

Fr Richard Fermer preached at St George's Paris on 1st August 2010. He says it certainly raised the profile of Angola amongst members of the congregation, and that they have also welcomed Revd Deacon Mansita Sangi on a visit to the parish. Mansita is Secretary to Bishop André and is studying at Strasbourg University.

SERMON TRINITY 9: 18TH SUNDAY YEAR C
Eccles.1:2 & 12-14 & 2:18-23, Col. 3:1-11;
Lk 12: 13 – 21
Fr Richard Fermer, St George's Paris

In August 2009 Hillary Clinton sat down for a luncheon at the hilltop presidential palace in Luanda, Angola, the tables heaped with lobster and cakes, while below the rusty roofs of the teeming slums shimmered. I do not think my visit to Angola next week will be accompanied by such culinary delicacies, but I am sure to see the glaring chasm between the rich and the poor. Though Angola's per capita gross domestic product is more than \$4000, the country remains at the bottom of the United Nations development indexes measuring quality of life. Most people live on less than \$2 a day, and the

average life expectancy for an Angolan male is 37 years. According to Human Rights Watch, billions of dollars of oil money have simply disappeared. Or in the words of today's Gospel, some keep on storing up wealth, while others struggle to survive and even perish.

This is part of a wider picture, as greed and inequality often are. Angola's history is a history of disruptive foreign intervention. It freed itself from corrupt and inept Portuguese colonial fascism in 1975, only to fall into the hands of the Cold War Powers, whose "cold" war was a very "hot" war in the most vulnerable countries of the world. After 27 years of Civil War, the country emerged to face the full attention of world capitalism, which wishes to reap the country's rich resources of petroleum and diamonds, while asking few questions about whether the money gained will ever reach ordinary Angolans.

Inequality as we know exists in Western contexts as well. According to the US Centre on Budget and Policy Priorities, 36.5 million Americans in

2007 — roughly one in eight — lived in poverty. In 2006, 35 million people in the US, 10.9 percent of households, lacked food at least some time during the year (USDA), although did not suffer from actual malnutrition, as around 800 million people on this planet do. In the words of American Jesuit Dean Brackley, «We have organised a world that excludes billions from the banquet table and the decision table. Inequality is not a defect of the system; it is the system.»

Lest such views are dismissed as extremist, let us turn to Basil the Great's commentary on today's Gospel. This respected 4th century Church Father did not hide behind spiritual and liturgical piety. Of the man in the parable he writes: «He forgot that we all share the same nature; he felt no obligation to distribute his surplus to the needy. His barns were full to bursting point, but still his miserly heart was not satisfied. (...) It would have been so easy to say: 'I will feed the hungry, I will open my barns and call in all the poor. (...) I will issue the generous invitation: 'Let anyone who lacks bread come to me. You shall share, each

according to need, in the good things God has given me, just as though you were drawing from a common well.'» Wonderful and powerful words from the 'th century. It would have been so easy and so easy today to be more generous.

Of course, I do not exclude myself from the parable of the rich fool. Let me confess something. For all my missionary work in Brazil, I am at heart not particularly adventurous. I am no hero. I would much prefer to be going to Angola with the backup of a professional company, than help from volunteers in London and the small Anglican Church in Angola, whose assets stretch to the ownership of just one car! I found reading about the variety of tropical diseases that could be awaiting me bewildering. Like the man in the parable, all this can take my focus away from the Christian purpose of the visit, which is to share the Gospel with Christians from another country and to learn from them more than I can give. In other words, my anxiety, indeed, our worries, our storing up, in whatever way we do so, diverts us from being «rich

towards God».

What a wonderful phrase that is: being rich towards God. It is first of all a celebration of God's richness, as Jesus is to say later on in this chapter: «Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.» What grace! In addition, it is about our generosity in responding to that grace, in building God's Kingdom of justice, founded on mutual sharing and love. To treat God richly is to trust deeply in God the Father and to share deeply with one's brothers and sisters, whether white or black, poor or rich.

That American Jesuit I quoted earlier goes on to make his own telling confession: «My own middle-class 'tribe' is a peculiar bunch. We're not all bad people, by any means, just a minority under an illusion shared by many minorities, that we are the center of gravity of the universe. The poor can free us from that fantasy.// Don't get me wrong. The middle class cultures of the North have made extraordinary

advances in civilization. While many came at great cost to despoiled nations and races, they are nonetheless historic achievements. (...) Yet we too pay a high price for our freedoms and economic security. While they allow us to pursue our personal life-projects, they generate a spirit of go-it-alone individualism. They separate us from each other. More serious still, they distance us from the poor and their daily struggle for life. (...) By removing us from [that struggle], the benefits of modernity induce in us a chronic low-grade confusion about what is really important in life: namely, life itself and love. (...) The victims stop us short; they show us that they, the marginalised, are at the center of things. We who nosh in Washington and Paris cafes are on the fringe. We clearly need these people more than they need us.» That is a huge reversal of thinking for those of us in Western societies that engage in projects to «assist» people in developing countries. If the man in the parable had been open to the existence of those in need, perhaps he would not have fallen into complacent self-sufficiency and spiritual torpor,

and been overwhelmed by his sudden death?

«Vanity of vanities! All is vanities», says the Teacher. And indeed it is, if there is not love, and the cultivation of life with God. The Teacher sees that there is no way of assuring one's legacy and inheritance. Yet, this is not altogether true, as Paul's Letter to the Colossians reminds us: «When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.» This is not about a merely other-worldly prize, it is founded in the realisation that our work, our legacy, our possessions must be rooted in a dying to self, and life-in-an Other. We find ourselves by losing our selves, and, as St Basil says, «drawing from a common well.» We can trust God to take forward the little good we have done, in our work and our legacy, whatever the twists and turns of history, for He weaves together the threads of blessedness in this life. It is not necessary anymore to live by accumulating things, or by that Spirit of anxious grasping that separates us from God and others, because true life doesn't start nor end there.

Life-in-an other, life for others, really does create a world where people will less needy, and community life can be organised on the basis of solidarity and sharing. This is surely the formula for a more just and balanced society in Angola, as it is for every part of the world.

In July 2009 President Barack Obama, the first black American President said in Ghana, «Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions.» We may add, it also needs, non-exploitative international partners, some of whom have been and should be the Churches that make up our own Anglican Communion. For it needs, as all human societies do, communities in whom God dwells, whose Holy and life-giving Spirit moves us to true life-for-others, life-in-an other, so that we may celebrate God's richness with praise, honour and service.