

Proper 17 - September 2, 2012. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

I've mentioned before that my parents were divorced when my brother and I were 7 years old. It's possible to dress the story up, of course, but the reality is that we were homeless until my mother's mother - our grandmother - agreed to take us in. My mother's health was fragile, and she was unable to work for most of the time I was growing up - and when she finally did get a job it was very part time.

So money was incredibly tight. One old beater of a car. No new anything. The family home falling into disrepair.

I have worked since I turned 14.

I would probably still be living in England, working at something that didn't require anything but a high school education if it wasn't for the communists! That's right, the communists. I couldn't afford to go to college. But our local borough council was dominated by communists, and they believed that if you had the ability to go to college but couldn't afford it, then the borough would pay - you should go.

They paid for my undergraduate degree, and two masters degrees. I am here today because of them.

Clark Gable once said this: "I've been rich and I've been poor. Rich is better"! I was poor - so I know what he meant. So while I have no illusions I'll be rich, I'm very happy to be not poor - to be a part of what I suppose you'd call "middle class". I am now - as all of you were at one time or are now - one of the workers. Tomorrow - Labor Day - is, in some measure, my day, and yours too.

I'm hoping to remain one of those who are not poor. But I have to tell you the trends don't look promising! As economist Robert Reich has said, one of the really troubling trends in our nation is "the increasing concentration of income, wealth, and political power at the very top -- among a handful of extraordinarily wealthy people -- and the steady decline of the great American middle class." http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-reich/inequality-us-economy_b_1846119.html
The 400 richest Americans now have more wealth than the bottom 150 million of us put together. 400 vs. 150,000,000. That sort of inequality is really staggering.

It's staggering, and disturbing, too. The middle class - those of us who are the engine of our economy - are disappearing.

Now you probably didn't come here today expecting to hear a lecture about the economy! And I'm not saying that wealth is bad - far from it! The issue is excessive wealth in the face of excessive poverty.

This difference is what's directly related to our faith, and, for that matter, to today's readings.

The passage from Deuteronomy is almost certainly not something Moses actually said. The so-called Deuteronomist wrote many hundreds of years after the time of the Patriarchs. He – or they – wrote at the behest of the king – in this case Josiah. And in a very real sense, he wrote with an intent to confirm the Status Quo the monarchy and cultural elites represented. What better way to control people than to tell them that the Law was for their benefit and in any case it came directly from God?!! I don't here have time to go into the level of detail necessary to bring out both the richness and the ignominy of the Deuteronomist's work. But one thing is clear – it is, among many things, a revisionist history – a re-telling of events to suit the keepers of the Status Quo – to protect the very wealthy elites and to keep the masses in their place.

There's deep irony in this. Biblical archaeologists now believe that the origin of the people of Israel was a coming together of disaffected Canaanite hill country farmers oppressed by their king and elites with nomadic herders, some of whom may well have escaped from Egypt. They created a culture most readily seen in the Book of Judges – which didn't have time for monarchs and cultural elites.

And yet a few hundreds of years later the new elites that emerged in this new community was doing it all over again! That – as I've said recently – led to the birth of the great prophetic tradition in the 8th Century B.C. – with such people as Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Hosea railing against the crass manipulation of the Law and the gross exploitation of the people.

Jesus is in that exact tradition.

And what does that tradition say? It's okay to be wealthy! It's okay to be rich! BUT...and it's a big "but"...but there are moral and ethical responsibilities that weigh most heavily on those who are wealthy, on those who are rich. The Law made a real effort at redistributing wealth every few years to prevent the rich from becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer. But human beings being what we are, folk like the Deuteronomist re-wrote parts of the legal code to benefit those wealthy folk.

And, frankly, they also ignored what the Law said about compassion for the orphan and widow and stranger – which is the biblical code phrase for the poor.

That's Jesus' complaint in today's gospel, and it should come as no surprise where he gets it from: Isaiah! “ ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

“You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” Don't be fooled – mechanical observances, outward form – they're ultimately beside the point if we fail in our basic task as believers: to be the promoters of God's justice and mercy, God's goodness and kindness, God's love.

And that justice and mercy, that goodness, kindness and love – they're not about remaining silent and standing idly by as the incredibly rich get incredibly richer, and the numbers of those in

poverty keep expanding too.

So what does our faith call us to do? To put our actions where our beliefs are!

- To oppose extreme economic injustice and to support those who are working to bring that injustice to an end.
- And to continue to work actively to alleviate some of the worst excesses of poverty – to help feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, and welcome strangers.

If we can work for that then we will truly be rich.

AMEN.