

Halling View Autumn 2017 – Fire, Wealth and Power

The present Palace of Westminster (or Houses of Parliament) was built in the nineteenth century to replace the previous parliament buildings which had been destroyed in a fire in 1834. Apparently, it was the worst fire in London between the Great Fire of 1666 and the Blitz at the time of the Second World War. The cause of the fire was burning no longer required tally sticks. Tally sticks were wooden sticks which had been used since the Middle Ages to keep accounts. They had become redundant in the Georgian Era.

When I discovered this, it struck me as somehow appropriate that the symbols of wealth and power perished together in the flames. The symbol of wealth fuelled a blaze which consumed the symbol of power.

I don't know about you, but I have an uneasiness about both wealth and power. In 1887, in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, Lord Acton wrote, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." The Bible says, "The love of money is the root of all evil" (I Timothy 6¹⁰).

You don't need much experience of the world to know that some people are completely ruthless in their desire to become rich or powerful or both, not caring whom they hurt on the way up, content to tell lies to get where they want to be, selfish and greedy when they've got there. It's also true, when you think about it, that wealth and power don't seem to bring much joy to those who have them. Look how quickly politicians age. As the Beatles sang, "Can't buy me love, everybody tells me so, can't buy me love, no no no, no!" But it's love that makes the world go round and God is love.

So what's the point of wealth and power? Well, of course, you can do great good if you've got a lot of money. People quite often say that, if they won the lottery, what they'd most like to do would be to see their families all right. Some say they would like to give really significant amounts to good causes. The problems are what would you be prepared to do in order to get rich? How many family quarrels are caused by money? Yet what, in the end matters more, money or people? And what would being rich do to you? Would it make you selfish? I've got a horrible feeling that, once you'd got money, it would be hard to part with it. You might even come to feel that you were worth more than people who hadn't got money. Some rich people seem to feel like that as they expect society to defer to them and to their needs.

Similar things could be said of being powerful. If you have power, you are in a position to make the world a better place. I hope that this is the motive of many of those who go into politics. On the other hand, which of your principles would you be prepared to compromise in order to get into office? If you were powerful, would you be corrupted by power, as Lord Acton predicted?

Will wealth and power be consumed eternally in the flames of hell? Let me suggest a remedy. Look at it this way. Everything that we have is a gift from God – not only our possessions, but our talents, our time, ourselves and everything about us. So what we have is a gift. What we are is a gift. This world is a gift. Our families, our friends and our neighbours are a gift. We receive, therefore, thankfully everything we have. We are thankful for our lives. We are thankful for what we have. We are thankful for one another. To give thanks is to bless. If we receive everything as a gift, we treat everything with respect. We respect other people, since they are a gift too. We respect ourselves – simply because we are who we are, not because we are rich or powerful and certainly not because we think that we are better than other people. God accepts me just as I am and that is the way He accepts you too in Christ. Being thankful for our lives and everything we have, we are generous too with our time, our possessions and our talents. They are given to us in trust. They are gifts of grace; they are free, which means that we are stewards of the grace of God. We are answerable to Him in love for what we do with our lives. Share the love.

Looked at this way, wealth and power can be a blessing, rather than a curse, but wealth and power are never the point of life. The point of life is love and God is love.

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