

RICHES¹

And it came to pass that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. The rich man died also, and was buried in hell² . . .

OF all conceptions which we can shape of the world—the world as profane, perverse, corrupt, and condemned by God—the truest, I think, is that offered by the Beloved Disciple when he tells us that *All that is in the world is the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life*. Lust of the eyes, rousing in man an inward distaste for what he has, and making him crave and seek after what he lacks; pride of life, exalting a man above himself, instilling contempt for others, and causing forgetfulness of God; lust of the flesh, enslaving a man to his senses and luring astray his reason through the enticements of voluptuousness. These, St Augustine says, are the three plagues which have overspread the world and tainted the healthiest parts of it. Lust of the eyes the desire to have—the root of all evils and specially of injustice. Pride of life, a foe of charity which leads men even to godlessness. Lust of the flesh, the source and spring of impure pleasures and scandalous excesses. My brothers in Christ, it is my conviction that riches as misused by the world feed every one of these wretched lusts, and that the most general and natural cause of men's injustice and pride and sensuality is that they are either rich or enamoured of riches.

To make clear my purpose and give it some shape, I use St Chrysostom's three distinctions in this matter of riches—their getting, their holding, their using. And I proceed to three assertions which I hold as incontestable truths and whence, if you will, you may draw great profit for the amendment of your lives. I say that, in the world's usual practice, the getting of riches is commonly an occasion of injustice; or, if you prefer, that the desire to get riches, if uncontrolled by a Christian spirit, is a proximate disposition to injustice, and this is the work of the lust of the eyes: truth the first. I say that, as a matter of course, the possession of riches puffs up a soul with a bent to vanity, and that nothing is likelier to inspire what St John calls the pride of life: truth the second. Last, I say that ill use of riches feeds in the heart the appetite for voluptuous-

¹ From a forthcoming book by Walter Shewring, to be published by Burns, and Oates. Our thanks are due to the publishers and author.—Editor.

² The complete original has an exordium and three parts. In these extracts from it I begin half-way through the exordium, translate Part I, then pass to the end of the whole sermon. The text is in *Véritables Sermons du R. Père Bourdaloue* (ed. Bretonneau), vol. 3, Brussels, 1708; pp. 3-17 and 37-38.

ness and stimulates the lust of the flesh: truth the third. I ask your attention to these three lessons. The injustice of men in the world through craving for earthly goods; their pride, through possession of earthly goods; their sensuality, through misuse of earthly goods; these three aspects of wealthy mundane life are to divide the sermon. But what cure is there for these three evils? The very one which Dives neglected: alms. One need only grasp thoroughly what is meant by the duty of almsgiving to be more temperate in the desire for riches, more humble in the possession of them, more holy in the using of them. Such is the theme which I ask you to consider.

St Jerome, despite his great authority, could scarcely hope to pass uncensured by the rich of the world when he said in a general and unqualified fashion that everyone who is rich is either personally unjust or heir to another's injustice and iniquity. *Every man of riches is either a rogue or a rogue's heir.*³ The assertion has been thought harsh and odious, and some have condemned it as rash and untrue; yet I doubt if in making their condemnation they pondered the words with as clear a mind and as sound and sharp a judgment as St Jerome himself, one of whose special gifts was a shrewd acquaintance with the world. And the deeper one delves into knowledge of the world, the more it comes home to one that the saint was right, that in fact few rich men are blameless, few can have quiet consciences, few stand out of reach of the curse which the words appear to call down on them. I appeal to your own experience. Take one by one the houses and families most marked for wealth and abundance of possessions—those, I mean, which most pride themselves on their honourable foundation and which in other respects have claims to integrity and even to religion; trace out the source whence that opulence is derived, and you will find few whose first origins do not reveal things that make one tremble. Without going further than what has been, or is even now, publicly notorious, you could name few of them where you might not be shown a chain of injustice as clear as that of inheritance—the fortune, the wealth, the elevation of a son reared on the fraud, the bad faith, the violence of a father. And you will own with trembling that one who passes for an upright and equitable man, the lawful possessor of the heritage of his fathers, is in God's sight as heavily burdened with their crimes and iniquities as in the view of the world he is richly endowed with their revenues and treasures. *Every man of riches is either a rogue or a rogue's heir.*

I am well aware what consequences ensue. There are wealthy men

³ *Omnis dives aut iniquus est aut heres iniqui.* I cannot at present trace the quotation. *Comm. in Mich.* II, 6, is about equally sweeping (*P.L.* 25, col. 1213).

among my listeners. I know what heart-searchings and anxiety I should awaken in them if I compelled them to plumb these depths, if I made them bear witness against themselves and measure all the extent of their obligations here. Or rather, I know what errors most rich men let absorb them, falsely persuaded that however their present wealth was first come by, it is not for them to call their fathers' memory in question; that to ask a son to make such scrutiny is to overturn the established order; that sins, if sins there have been, are personal things; and that if they have grounds, even serious grounds, for doubting their predecessors' conduct, still their own good faith serves as a kind of prescriptive right, and on that they may rest. These are errors which cannot be countenanced by the principles of true religion; yet for how many of the world's rich do they act as pretexts for stifling remorse! But woe betide them if greed so blinds, so misleads, so possesses them that in a matter as grave as this they will jeopardise their salvation; and woe betide myself if in servile compliance or fear to shatter their hollow peace I gloss over truths which ought to save them, harsh and unpalatable though those truths may be!

In any event, my brothers in Christ, it is an oracle uttered by the Holy Ghost and proved by experience through all the ages that those who seek to become rich fall into the snare of the devil and into countless desires, not only vain but pernicious, which plunge them at last into everlasting damnation. Such are the words of the great Apostle in his first Epistle to Timothy. And St Chrysostom on this passage, considering more particularly what these desires are and arguing from the principles of faith and morals, observes that this mark of injustice and reprobation assigned to earthly riches comes from three kinds of deviation which seekers for gain seldom escape. His reflections deserve your close attention; they are as luminous as they are instructive. Men wish, he says, to be rich at any price. They wish to be rich without limits. They wish to be rich quickly. There you have three wishes which might pervert a saint, three poisoned springs of all the injustices earth abounds with. I need only amplify a little to show you at once the malign nature and the fatal outcome of these three things.

Men wish to be rich; that is the end they aim at, on which they are absolutely resolved. The means can be thought of later; the essential thing, they say, is to get the wherewithal to push their way in the world, make some show in the world, keep up their rank in the world, live at ease in the world; such is the goal their wishes look to. They would like to attain it by honest paths, to keep their good

name if that may be; but failing such honest paths, they are inwardly ready to turn to others, shrinking at nothing to win their aim.

*Money, good Romans—that's the primal need;
Let virtue follow, but let riches lead.*

So once wrote the Roman satirist,⁴ lashing his countrymen for the depravity of their morals; and why—as St Augustine remarks—why should we not listen to pagan sages when our own morals are still to mend? Venal and selfish souls, cried the heathen poet, that is the shameful lesson for ever preached by your avarice and followed unblushingly by yourselves. Wealth first, then virtue, but before everything wealth. When we have that, you say, we will think of applying ourselves to wisdom; but before wisdom we needs must work for wealth, since without it wisdom itself is spurned as madness. That is your argument, and all your philosophy is resumed in the damnable conclusion:

*Wealth, wealth's the goal from which we dare not swerve;
Fair means are best, but any means will serve.*

Let us make our fortunes, swell our revenues, heap up wealth; honest wealth, if we can; otherwise, wealth by hook or crook, and at any cost.

In such terms the poet laid bare to them the corruption of their hearts; and what saddens me is that the same terms, with their emphasis unabated, are applicable today to numberless Christians who seem to have no religion but this: *Wealth, wealth's the goal from which we dare not swerve*. They feel indeed an inward repugnance to using shameful means; but despite that repugnance, which is inspired by honour and never quite quenched, their eagerness and their greed are stronger still. Thus it comes about, in St Chrysostom's words, that the passion for the end overrides the injustice of the means. *Fair means are best, but any means will serve*.

Now imagine a man in this frame of mind. What will he shrink from, or who will stop him? What will he not mould his conscience to? What temptation will he not succumb to? Will he scruple at usury? Will he blench at the names of confidence⁵ and simony? Will he lack the wit to disguise and palliate theft? Will he be at a loss to find specious arguments for violence and extortion? If he holds an office of authority, will he blush to make sordid profits which discredit his function? If he is a judge, will he shrink from selling justice? If in commerce and business, will he consider fraud and perjury criminal? If the property of a ward is entrusted to him, will he fear to manipulate it for his profit? If he controls public money,

⁴ Horace, *Ep.* I, 1, 53-54; and below, 65-66.

⁵ Confidence: a technical term for a special kind of traffic in benefices.

will he give the name of embezzlement to current abuses in such matters? No, dear listeners, none of these things will hold him back, and often none will disquiet him. Once he desires to get rich, there is nothing he will not set himself to, nothing he will not hold as his right, nothing he will not think permitted him. Is he weak and timid? He will be knavish and crafty. Is he bold and powerful? He will be harsh and ruthless. Enthralled by his passion, he will spare neither secular nor sacred; he will lay his hands on the very altars. The patrimony of the poor will become his own, and if he has any conscience left, he will find—or rather he will contrive to get—reassurance from theologians. Concealing the core of the matter from them, he will talk of things by halves, and by his astuteness and obliqueness will wrest from them judgments in his favour and make them, despite themselves, stand surety for his injustice. Should the rest of the world be scandalised, he will yet have authoritative opinions which he thinks he can reckon on. In any event, and whatever may be said of him, he will gain his purpose. He desires to be rich, and desires it absolutely. *Wealth, wealth's the goal, and any means will serve.*

And not only does he desire this; he desires it without assigning himself bounds; and in this again he runs no less into danger than into folly. In these days at least, where are the rich who curb their desires with wise restraint and prescribe a limit to their fortune? Where are the rich who content themselves with sufficiency, then raise their thoughts higher and tell themselves, 'Enough of possessions on earth; we must seek those heavenly treasures which neither moth nor rust consumes'? With the rich as we know them, it is labour lost to urge that such voluntary restraint is the surest mark of a sound and well-balanced mind, labour lost to show them the madness of a man whose needs are bounded but whose wishes are boundless and limitless, like the man in Horace who, wanting only a glass of water, must yet needs draw it not from a fountain but some great river. (*Sat.* 1, 54-56). Labour lost, again, to tell them with the Preacher that this burning desire to amass and gather is nothing but vanity and vexation of spirit; that like everything else, the passion for getting should have an end; and that one of God's most palpable chastisements on rich misers is that all their opulence does not diminish their fear of poverty, and that the more they have gained, the more they wish to gain. Labour lost, in fine, to prove to them that for all their heaping of wealth on wealth they are none the more loved or esteemed or honoured in the world; that when once the bounds of the necessary are passed, their life is none the happier or pleasanter; and that the only effect of this great wealth

is to bring down on them the envy, the indignation, the hatred of everyone else. All such words leave them untouched. Consumed with grasping covetousness, they murmur in the secrecy of their hearts that in the world there is nothing that is not necessary; that, all considered, nothing is in itself sufficient, that one can never have too much, that a man is allowed no worth or value except by the test of what he has; that when harvest is here, it is good to reap to the full; that to curb one's desires argues a timid soul or pusillanimous conscience. Such maxims harden their utterers, and so possess them that nothing can disabuse them. Now imagine what injustices this unchecked passion brings in its wake. Imagine what molestations, oppressions, extortions must go with it inseparably.

Hence it is that God's inspired Prophets uttered curses so terrifying against this devouring greed. *Woe to you who join house to house and link field to field! Shall you alone dwell in the midst of the earth?* (Is. 5, 8). What power, what eloquence in those words! Woe to you who add house to house, inheritance to inheritance, till your neighbourhood is a dreaded thing; woe to you who amid men's detestation gain little holding on little holding and hence find means to build up your vast estates; are you alone to dwell in the midst of the earth? 'But why', some rich man answers, 'why may I not add to my possessions? If I pay a fair price for what I take, if I do no wrong to any man, why may I not enlarge my property?' Once more, woe to you! Woe, because almost always such enlargements have been and will be iniquitous, if not to the man whose inheritance you buy, at least to the men at whose expense you pay him. *Woe to him who multiplies what is not his own*, (Hab. 2, 6) to him who desires to multiply his revenues unceasingly, because in multiplying what is his own, he is sure to put with it what is his neighbour's. *Woe to him who heaps up covetousness to his house, to make his nest on high!* (Hab. 2, 9). Woe to him who has no ear for anything but his own greed and ambition, who is for ever weaving new schemes and imagining grand designs to make his house greater. Why so? Because, in the Holy Spirit's arresting phrase, the very stones whence the house is built will cry vengeance on him, and the timber within its joints will render testimony against him. (cf. Hab. 2, 11).

Last, men desire to be rich quickly; and because it is only certain conditions of life, certain professions, certain offices that provide expeditious ways of doing so, men scheme and canvass and work for these against every rule of Christian prudence. To get rich by hard work or long saving was the old road men followed in the simplicity of the early centuries; our age has found by-paths which are shorter

and pleasanter. A special turn given to one's authority, a hint dropped, a bargain struck, countless other devices that you know of—these are the ways which haste and impatience for gain have set in fashion. Hence spring those amazing advances in fortune, those hundredfold harvests of men's talents and industry; hence it comes that within a few years or a few months men find themselves transfigured, and from crawling in the dust rise to the very peak of prosperity.

Now, my brothers, it is a truth of faith that whoever hastens to be rich will not keep his innocence. (cf. Prov. 28, 20). The Holy Spirit himself declares it; and even without that declaration the thing would be manifest. It is incomprehensible, for instance, that a man whose gains and income are reasonable should suddenly make such a fortune as I speak of; or that one who—as John the Baptist bids us—takes no more than his due (cf. Lk. 3, 14) should arrive at an opulence whose crowning pinnacle comes to view almost as soon as its foundations. It must surely be that bad faith, not to say roguery, has had a share in the matter and lent wings to greed to achieve so prompt and swift a flight.

At that rate, you tell me, a great number of men of honour must expect to be damned. I reply that we should determine first who these men of honour are, and in what sense they are called so. I say further that it is not for me to tell any man to expect damnation, but that it is part of the office of my ministry to expound the sacred oracles of the word of God. If those you call men of honour find themselves there condemned, it is for them to take heed accordingly. In any event, it is an undeniable truth that *he who makes haste to be rich shall not be innocent*. Such a man is not blameless even in the judgment of men; how shall he be so in the judgment of God?

Yet such is the stubbornness of the world that to gain wealth quickly men will put aside innocence, renounce integrity, strip themselves of common humanity, devour the poor man's substance, ruin the widow and the orphan; and thereupon, by the grossest of hypocrisies, they will often be stirred, or rather will stir themselves, to piety; as if piety and reform following on injustice without repairing it could cover and sanctify everything. Need it astonish us that the Son of God, with his gaze on these aberrations, should speak ill of riches in his Gospel and call them not riches only but iniquitous riches, *the mammon of iniquity*? Need we wonder why the Wise Man, enlightened as he was by the spirit of God, should look everywhere for a just man who had not gone after gold and silver—why he should think him a man of miracles, desiring to sing his praises

and canonising him before his death? *Who is he, that we may praise him? for in his lifetime he has done wondrous things.* (Eccli. 31, 8-9). But, St Augustine comments, if we seldom find a man just enough to be never dazzled by gold and silver, how much harder, nay how impossible it must be for a man to be dazzled so and yet remain just!

You who live in the world, would you curb this unjust appetite? Learn what is meant by the obligation of almsgiving. Learn, I say, that the more you get, the more you are bound to give and distribute; that your alms must mount in proportion to your revenues, and that it is by this proportion that you will be judged. So St Bernard argued in one of his letters. For, said he, either you are a rich man and have an excess; then that excess is not for yourself but for the poor: or your possessions are modest, and then why seek an increase which you must give away again? Once take to heart this great truth, and you will dread such gains rather than desire them. . . .

Weep, my brothers, said St James the Apostle to the rich of this world, weep and howl for the perils which beset you and the calamities which will come upon you. You are living now in pomp and in luxury, in delicacy and in pleasure; but the time will come when your goods will be taken from you, when you will stand before God in uttermost destitution. The rust consuming your gold and silver will bear testimony against you, reminding you, all too late—to your confusion and your despair—that you should not have put your trust in perishable riches. You heap up great treasures, but after being on earth the treasures of iniquity, they will be at Doomsday treasures of wrath and vengeance.

Yet, if you will, you may transform them to treasures of justice and holiness. How so? In the first place, you must come by them honestly; in the second, you must divide them with the poor. Seek out the poor in prison and hospital, in all those private houses, or rather those gloomy and cheerless hovels they languish in. Go and witness their pitiable plight. You will never be so hard of soul as to deny them aid; it would be an inhumanity and a savagery of which I cannot believe you capable. Your hearts will melt for them, your hands will open for their relief, and they will be your protectors and advocates before God. Such is the true advantage you may win from your wealth, the holy use you must make of it. Fear Dives's doom, and profit by his example and my advice.

And you who are poor, learn to find comfort in your poverty. Learn to value your poverty, which preserves you from the dangers and ills which attend the rich. It has come to you as a necessary thing; make it a voluntary one by accepting it humbly and bearing it

patiently. What would it profit you to be poor if all the while you were burning with greed? What would it profit you to be stripped of wealth and yet have a heart that was full of cravings? Blessed are the poor, but the poor in spirit, the poor detached from every affection towards earthly riches. Such is the poverty canonised by Christ in his Gospel, a poverty which is compatible with any condition of life. Thus, and thus alone, can we be poor in this world and merit the everlasting riches of the next, to which I pray God's grace may bring you.

LOUIS BOURDALOUE (1632-1704)

Translated by WALTER SHEWRING.

OBITER

ST BENEDICT-JOSEPH LABRE was born in 1748, and his bicentenary may encourage devotion to one who is surely a saint for our times. He is the patron of providential failure. He failed as a Cistercian, he failed as a Carthusian. His short life was one of no public importance; a displaced person, he wandered through Europe, from shrine to shrine, and he died in Rome as he had lived, in poverty and obscurity. But the memory of that hidden figure, lost in prayer for hours together in the churches of Rome, broke at once into a chorus of acknowledgment from children, from old women, from the destitute whose world he had made his own. Never was there a more immediate awareness of the fact of sanctity, and the solemnity of canonisation only sealed the sure knowledge of the people of God.

St Benedict-Joseph was a reproach to his generation, to the century of the Enlightenment. He showed forth in its most piercing light the vocation of penance and humility. He broke across the frontiers of pride and prosperity as surely as he invaded the frontiers of nations. From Normandy to Burgundy, from Loretto to Compostella, from Einsiedeln to Rome, he made his way. And his mission was folly to the wise, but its meaning remains and grows with the years that have come after. The need for penance, that radical truth at the centre of the Christian life so easily acknowledged, so hardly achieved: that is his teaching, more eloquent than words.