May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I’ve got a book here called ‘Why Go to Church?’ It’s written by Timothy Radcliffe, a Dominican Catholic Priest who last year was made a Cardinal by the late Pope Francis.

The introduction goes like this: One Sunday a mother shook her son awake, telling him it was time to go to church. ‘Get out of bed immediately and go to church’. ‘Mother, I don’t want to. It’s so ***boring***! Why should I bother?

For two reasons: ‘You know you ***must*** go to church on a Sunday, and secondly, you are the bishop of the diocese!’

Well, we may not be, or aspire to be, bishops, but I just think that’s a great question for all of us here this morning. Why do we come here week after week? What do we say if someone who isn’t a church-goer asks us the question? Why do you go to Church?

No doubt we shall all answer differently, for we are all on our unique journey of faith, but we must all be expecting to find something here today, as we come into the presence of God, which will help us to cope better with all the experiences we encounter in our daily lives.

For as much as we, hopefully, find joy in life, we all carry worries and burdens, and it’s not just in our own personal situations. None of us can escape what is going on in the world, the world that God loves so much. Whether that’s overseas or in our own country, the loudest voices now are the political extremes offering solutions. The central, more moderate ground hardly gets a mention. But we are aware of the stark contrast between the rich and powerful in the world, and those who are struggling to survive, often in horrific circumstances.

And today, we encounter something of these two extremes in the parable that Jesus told in Luke’s Gospel, where his two characters could not be further apart in their position in life.

We are immediately aware of the sharp contrast between them - the rich man, who isn’t given a name - and the poor man, Lazarus.

The rich man shows every sign of lavish wealth with a fine wardrobe, and a sumptuous diet every day. Lazarus, at the rich man’s gate, is revealed as someone so hungry and distressed that even the dogs lick his sores. This shows that he is not just poor, but also in that society, unclean, and therefore a total outcast.

The issue of material possessions and wealth is the subject of several of Jesus’ parables in Luke. Earlier in chapter 13, we have the story of the rich man who stores up all his crops in bigger and bigger barns. And God says to him – ‘you fool, you might die tonight and all this wealth will mean nothing to you’.

And in chapter 14, Jesus notices how people love to have social recognition and give lavish dinner parties for their equally rich and influential friends, and he speaks of the value of humility, when they should rather give a banquet and invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.

This theme of how wealth, and the comfort that goes with it, can distort our insight into the reality all around us, comes to a climax in our reading this morning. It is only when both the beggar and the rich man die that we see the real problem.

There is no suggestion that the rich man did anything specifically to hurt the poor man. We are not told that he deliberately refused him food, or tried to rid this beggar from his gates. In fact, there is no suggestion that having wealth is inherently wrong.

What appears to be the problem is that his comfort and wealth drew a kind of curtain between him and Lazarus so that he was unaware of his plight. His wealth made him blind to what was before his very eyes.

It’s a challenging thought. We are fortunate here in Worcester Park to live in a relatively affluent area, and although we are not all excessively rich by any means, our comfort can distort our vision, in the same way that the rich man’s did.

Now, after death, a stark reversal of these two men’s situation occurs. The rich man finds himself with no comfort, while he sees Lazarus with Abraham, and cries out to him to have mercy, and send Lazarus to bring him some water.

Notice, that even in this state, he sees Lazarus in the role of a servant, who will fetch him what he needs. So the rich man still hasn’t got it. There is no sign of repentance, just his need and the possibility that Lazarus might be of use to bring him some comfort.

I wonder where we see ourselves in this parable. Do we identify with the rich man, who somehow is so focused on making our own lives and that of our families, more comfortable, that we do little to help the plight of others. Or has this parable made us think about our material possessions and the importance we place on them.

Hopefully, as we sang that beautiful hymn, ’I the Lord of sea and sky’, we were able to focus on God’s love for all people, and our calling to do all we can to help relieve suffering wherever it exists.

Do we recognise the need for a change of attitude, where we might develop a more compassionate heart towards those who suffer. Many of us give to the Food Bank, and I know that many, too, are supporting the Angel Tree initiative to bring Christmas presents to the children whose mothers are in prison at Christmas and who otherwise will not receive a gift.

In a strange way, we see that although Lazarus was as poor as any person could be, in reality the rich man was even poorer. How can that be? This is a little story that might help us. It’s told by Flor McCarthy, who is a Dominican like Timothy Radcliffe.

A businessman parked his brand new car in the street right outside his office, and went off to do some business – or in today’s language – to make a deal! (not quoting anyone in particular!).

When he returned, he found a poor little boy looking at his beautiful car with awe and wonder.

‘Is that your car?’ the little boy asked. ‘Yes’, replied the businessman.

‘It’s beautiful’ said the little boy. ‘How much did you pay for it?’.

‘To be honest, sonny, I don’t know.’

‘You mean, you bought it and can’t remember what you paid for it?’

‘Sonny, I didn’t buy it. It was a present from my brother’.

‘You mean your brother gave it to you, and it didn’t cost you a penny?’

‘That’s right.’

‘I wish I ......’ began the little boy.

The man was sure he was going to say, ‘I wish I had a brother like that’.

But what he said was ‘I wish I could ***be*** a brother like that’.

The businessman concluded ‘There I was in my fancy suit with the keys of a brand new car in my hand. And there was this poor boy. Yet the boy had more love in his heart than I had. In that sense he was richer than I was.

I was so impressed that I took him and his little brother, who was handicapped, for a drive. The next few hours were the happiest of my life.’

So the rich man was suffering from the worst kind of poverty of all – poverty of heart. His heart has no compassion and love.

Flor McCarthy concludes that it is possible to be as wounded by riches as it is to be wounded by poverty. The greatest evil in the world today is lack of love, expressed often as indifference.

And a final word from him. A reporter asked a child what he wanted to do with his life. ‘I want to see the age of twenty’ came the reply.

It occurs to me that, even though Flor McCarthy wrote that 25 years ago, it is as relevant today as it was then.

Food for thought!

Let’s finish with a prayer.

Almighty and ever-living God,

fill our hearts with your love.

Give us the grace to rise above our selfishness,

Open our eyes to see,

where we have been blind to the plight of others,.

Help us to hear your call, ‘Whom shall I sent?’.

May we reply, ‘Here I am Lord, it is I, Lord?

I will go where you lead me.

I will hold your people in my heart.

We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.