

'You cannot serve God and Wealth'

The 14th Sunday after Trinity: Readings Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113; Luke 16:1-13

If we've come to the end of what was called 'the new Elizabethan Age', what has been *achieved* in our country over those 70 years? Great social change; great technological progress; but what about *moral* progress, or advances in *justice*?

Some of us can remember (in my case, just remember) the world of 1952. No paradise ... There was still post-war food rationing for everybody – but there weren't any foodbanks. Few homes had modern conveniences we'd now take for granted – but tens of thousands of council houses were being built, with assured tenancies for a few shillings a week, and homelessness was almost unknown. There was pride in the new National Health Service – but it didn't have over six million patients waiting for treatment. Wages were not high – but households rarely got into debt.

What kind of progress is it, when thousands are in severe *debt*, and millions more in fear of debt? Families, including many here in Devizes, wondering whether they will be able to afford to heat their homes this coming winter – while the energy producers are making billions of pounds in profit every month? What kind of progress is it, when *money*, or the lack of it, is the source of such anxiety?

But shouldn't spiritual people ('the children of light') rise above such anxiety and have no concern with money? That fierce prophet Amos castigated those who enjoyed or sought wealth. 'Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land ... The LORD has sworn ... I will never forget any of their deeds.' You can find similar scorn for wealth and the wealthy in religions across the world. And Jesus has story after story, conversation after conversation, about *money and debt*.

A rich farmer plans to rebuild his barns and enjoy his wealth; but, says God, tonight you shall die and can take none of it with you. A man who wants to follow Jesus is told to give away all his goods, and as he sadly goes away Jesus comments that it's easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom. And then this strange story of a dishonest manager, culminating in Jesus' saying, Nobody can serve two masters: you cannot serve God and Mammon – or money, or wealth.

So how *are* we to live as followers of Jesus, in a world even more entangled in financial transactions and in lust for wealth than first-century Palestine?

'You cannot serve God and wealth' ... One way of responding to Jesus' hard saying is *demonising* money. Shun the unrighteous Mammon; don't let that filthy lucre touch your baptised hands. Some have literally lived that way, in voluntary poverty. The Cynic teachers of Jesus' time did so. A few achieve it today, living totally off-grid and self-sufficiently. But is that a calling for *all* of us?

'You cannot serve God and wealth' ... Another way of responding is the *communist* one. Not an order imposed by the state, but *voluntary* sharing of goods, as the early Church in Jerusalem practised, and as monastic communities do today, where there is no private property. And that is a way for some of us; but is it for all?

'You cannot serve God and wealth' ... The most common way down the centuries of interpreting Jesus' hard sayings about money is saying: Well, it's not the *possession* of wealth that counts, it's your *attitude* to it. You can, in Jesus' words again, 'make friends from dishonest Mammon'. Which can be convenient, but very evasive. So the billionaire can amass his or her assets and say that really they don't matter at all and could be relinquished tomorrow.

Is that realistic? Does it actually recognise the *power* of money, both for those who possess it and those who lack it? Money originates as a human invention, as a practical means of exchange. But it has swollen into something much more massive, much more alluring; into a way of measuring human worth; into Mammon, the idol, the great rival of God our true and only origin and end.

How to restrain and combat that power? How to replace the love of power and wealth with the wealth and power of love? There are some ancient hints in the Law of Moses. Every seventh day is a *sabbath*, when you're not permitted to work or to exploit others' labour. Every seventh sabbath year is a *jubilee*, when all debts must be remitted. And *usury* is forbidden, for lending at interest gives one citizen power over another.

What counts here is not money, not wealth, not houses, but *people*, their flourishing and their rest. Money, financial capital, is called 'liquid assets'. But the *true* capital, the true worth, is not liquid but the solid, living body – of men and women and children, of trees and fields, of bread and wine.

So when today we're told that the most important thing is *economic growth*, we must respond in the name of God: no, no, no to Mammon. For such growth relies on exploiting human labour and the earth's resources, relies on making us desire and buy stuff we don't need. No: what matters – as in Jesus' parable of the vine – is not growth, not size, but *fruitfulness*.

For that social vine to bear fruit, money needs to be put in its place: not that of a god but more like manure, to humbly fertilise the whole plant. Some branches have far too much of this manure, some far too little; and that is a scandal.

In this autumn of undoubted financial anxiety, can we commit ourselves to serve not our own wealth, not the wealth of a nation, but simply one another in our need; and in so doing serve the one God who is Father and Son and Spirit, whose story and whose name we confess?

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