

## God and Mammon

A sermon preached by the *Revd Joanna Coney* at the 8.00am service at St Peter's, Wolvercote and at the 10.00am service at All Saints, Wytham on Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> September 2010

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Luke 16, v. 1-13

As I was pondering this morning's readings I learnt, rather to my surprise, from a book by Jane Williams, that Jesus told 16 parables about money. And that is more than he told about prayer. So we cannot ignore the fact that Jesus recognized that the subject of material wealth – both too much or not enough - is a universal problem that all his followers must take seriously and that it is always a moral and ethical problem and not just a practical one.

The parable he told that we have heard read as our gospel reading this morning (Luke 16, v. 1-13) is perhaps more difficult to interpret than some others. The story of the rich man and of his manager who was squandering his master's property, and who, when faced with dismissal for embezzlement, came up with a cunning, and not too honest, a plan to ensure that he did not become an outcast – a manual worker – but by acting shrewdly gained his master's commendation. How familiar a scenario is that in the financial climate we find ourselves today?

Back to our Gospel - it seems that Bible commentators have at least 3 different interpretations of this particular parable

The **first** interpretation is that it is commending prudence. This interpretation suggests that just as the unrighteous are prudent in affairs of the world so the righteous must be prudent in regard to the matters regarding the Kingdom, a reasonably clear and easy idea to understand.

The **Second** interpretation suggests that the story is an example of a typical argument from the lesser to the greater. So it suggests an exploration of the phenomenon that if even an unrighteous steward knows how to deal with matters of the world, how much more the sons of light ought to know how to respond to God

And the **third** group of commentators suggest that the important message is found in interpreting the story in its context. It uses the fact that the steward finds himself facing a crisis, a time of decision, to illustrate the crises and decisions that all disciples face from time to time in discerning how to behave.

Interestingly none of these three suggested interpretations actually focus on the steward's business ethics themselves although all recognize that in a time of crisis radical choices must be made between serving God and Mammon.

Towards the end of the reading we find some additional sayings indicating how these decisions – these choices - might be made.

**Firstly** that that we should deliberately set out to discern - and then contrast - what are the true riches and what are 'the unrighteous mammon'

**Secondly** that we can be sure that faithfulness in spiritual things begins in the common question of honesty. Honesty with others, honesty with ourselves and above all honesty with God.

**Thirdly** that it is always necessary to start with honesty in small things if we want to get the big things right

**and finally** that it is never possible to serve 2 masters: choices have to be made. And if this point is missed, then the parable will have been misunderstood. Nowhere does Jesus suggest that the disciples are to emulate the steward in their use of money. Indeed their prudence must be to do with the true riches to be found in God's Kingdom, not in possessions and earthly wealth

So this story leads us to re-assess our values, to ask ourselves:-

Do we serve God or Mammon and how might we discern the difference?

Do we live by the values of this world or the values of eternity?

And it points out to us that what we do with our material wealth will always echo who we are and what are the values by which we live.

But there is of course no a black and white answer. We cannot say that material wealth is always sinful and harmful. We know that that is just not so, it is all a matter of how we regard it and how we use it. But what we can be sure about is that *-where our treasure is there shall our heart be also.*

St Ignatius of Loyola had a lot to say about this in his spiritual exercises. He employs a concept of what he calls 'detachment' – an attitude to earthly things that **does not** ignore or deny their importance and value in any way but **does** put God and our faith in him **above** all earthly things. So things of this world are important but things of eternity, things of God, are to be **much more** important. So our attitude to our possessions, to the things of Mammon, becomes one more **of stewardship** than of **ownership**. We need to control our possessions rather than let our possessions control us. It is all about priorities, of knowing where our real treasure is and living in the light of that knowledge

So perhaps the challenge is to ask ourselves 'what are the things that control my life?' What 'possessions, what of Mammon, must I abandon, or at least subdue, in order to be a better disciple? What is the most important thing in my life, Is it?

-My family

-My financial security

-Having things that give me material comfort and convenience

-My social status – having the right friends

-My time

I'm sure you can think of many more...

So the question might be 'which of these things take precedence over my love for God and living for his praise and service? or 'which of these things weigh me down and restrict my time and my freedom to love him, worship him and serve him? It could be the need to control the events and people around us or it could be a worry and lack of faith that dominates my life. As Jesus says elsewhere in the gospel, we are to sit lightly to the practical things that so often worry us out of all proportion – what shall we eat, what shall we drink and what shall we wear. We can trust our heavenly father to give us these things. We are, he says, to set our sights on the

things of eternity. Seek ye **first** the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, his justice, and all these things will be added unto you. As our own Bishop John says, in relation to many contexts in his book *The Life and Work of a Priest*, we should  
Never let the **urgent** threaten the **important**  
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And of course all these questions need to be asked, not only of ourselves, as individuals, or even of our church, as a worshipping community, but we also need to evaluate our attitudes to the prevalent priorities of our western culture in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, what are the priorities that need questioning in our world?. As just two examples, what is our attitude to the issue of the global sharing of resources between rich and poor Nations and to the care for our Planet and what can we do to put them right?

And so let us pray for the courage and honesty to sit down and take a long hard look at what we deem important, to look again at what we do with Gods great gift to each of us, the gift of life itself, of his unconditional love and of his abundance, and ask -  
- What really directs our lives?  
- What worries dominate our thinking?  
- What is our stewardship of all that God entrusts to us?

And so may our prayer be for gratitude, for generosity and for honestly, in praise for the love that we receive freely from God, and that can only grow according to the measure that we give it away to others.

Amen