

A Stewardship Sermon preached at St Mary's, Warwick Last Sunday in Advent 2010

On the *first* Sunday of Advent we looked at different Old Testament approaches to wealth and concluded an important biblical insight is that the God of Creation's the source of all we have, and the end and summation of all life as well. So as we come to the *last* Sunday of Advent we turn to the New Testament and, in particular Jesus' teaching on the subject. We noted that Old Testament ideas about these matters appear within the context of an agricultural and non-money based economy that was without a *developed* structure of state government or taxes. Something similar was true in 1st century Palestine – it was still a predominantly agrarian society, although there were larger towns plus something resembling a state system and taxes but they were administered by a pagan and occupying power.

Interestingly, Jesus taught a great *deal* about money and wealth, and it's difficult to do justice to all of it in one, short sermon. It's clear that Jesus did not have a particularly high opinion of 'money' as it existed in his day. He teaches about mammon (the Aramaic word for 'riches') saying that one cannot be a servant of both God and money (Mt 6: 24) and suggests wealth can be an obstacle to entering the Kingdom of God: *It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter God's Kingdom* (Mk 10: 25). So, against that background, let's look briefly at two of Jesus' most well-known discussions of wealth – the question of paying of taxes to Caesar (which is in Matthew, Mark and Luke's gospels); and the story about the man who tears down his barns to build bigger ones in Luke's account.

Jesus' teaching on paying tax to the Roman Emperor starts with the Herodians, a traditionalist religious group, who are trying to entrap him with a question about this controversial issue. It's worth recalling that Jesus doesn't have one of the imperial coins about him but his inquisitors do. This would have been viewed as a plus to many in the audience, because carrying such coins was to traffic in graven images and affirm the oppression of God's people. However, Jesus would've lost a few of those 'brownie points' with his words about giving to Caesar the things that were Caesar's and to God the things that were God's, which some would have seen as a shameful compromise. It's likely that Jesus' audience would have included those who thought God's Kingdom would come through detailed observance of the Law (the Torah); some would see the Kingdom arriving through the violent overthrow of Rome and yet others through political and religious negotiation with their overlords. But for Jesus, God's Kingdom was breaking in upon the world through his preaching, teaching and healing; and in the light of such a momentous change the coins and taxes of Rome were a relatively trifling matter. And here we get an important clue to Jesus' approach towards money – he deals in *priorities* rather than absolutes.

We can see something similar at work in a different way with Jesus' parable of the rich fool who built bigger and bigger barns. The contrast between those who're wise and those who're foolish is a stock image in the Book of Proverbs and other Old Testament wisdom literature. It goes without saying that the figure of the fool is not someone without schooling or with some form of educational needs. Fools are those who're self-centred and believe they can run their lives and the world without reference to a higher order, without reference to God. So the thought in the landowner's mind, when he has an unexpectedly plentiful harvest, isn't: 'how can I help others', but rather on *himself* and

his own need for larger storage facilities in order to hoard his wealth. At heart this parable provides an example of those who 'make treasure for themselves' but are not 'rich towards God'. Again the issue here is priorities – the main concern in *this* person's life was himself rather than God.

And Jesus' teaching about how love of wealth can skew our priorities is mirrored in an old folktale about three brothers who lived happily in the hills. They were open and generous people of deep faith. One day they were digging the garden of their home and uncovered a large box. They opened it up and discovered it was full of gold. All three began to cry out to one another, "Beware of the soul-taker! Whatever will we do? Do we bury it again, or do we simply have to leave?"

Four other men who'd recently moved into a nearby house overheard the shouted conversation so they walked round to the home of the three brothers and inquired about their problem. "We're trying to decide how to get away from the soul-taker," they said.

"What's a soul-taker?" the shorter man asked. "Can you show us?"

The brothers walked to the far corner of their garden and pointed at the box full of gold coins. "This is the soul-taker," they said.

The four newcomers all laughed. "Can you believe it?" the taller one said. "They think gold is a soul-taker."

The bearded one spoke to the brothers, "If you're worried, go into town for a few hours and we'll take care of your problem." The brothers agreed and left immediately. The men began to make plans. They decided to divide the gold equally. They *also* decided that two of them should go back home and bring something to eat and drink, whilst the other two would finish digging up the box.

The two men who stayed to work agreed that things would be much better if they were able to split the gold two ways. They made plans to ambush and kill the other two when they returned and bury them in the hole where the box was found. Meanwhile, the two men who went to get the food also decided to divide the gold. "We'll poison the food," they said. "Then we'll bury them in the hole made by the box."

So when they were returning from their house with the poisoned food, the men who stayed at the brothers' home ambushed and killed their companions. Before they buried the corpses they decided to eat the meal while it was still fresh. Soon after they began to eat, they both became very sick and died. When the three brothers returned to their home, they saw four dead men and a box of gold. "We told them that it was a soul-taker, but they didn't believe us," the brothers said. And they reburied the gold and moved away.

It can be tempting to flee in the face of money or hand over decisions to those who are confident they know better, but that wasn't Jesus' approach. He taught that we need to look carefully at matters to do with whatever wealth and riches we may have, and weigh them in terms of the priorities of God's kingdom. Jesus doesn't necessarily call us to turn our backs on the things of the world. Indeed, we can see that in the story of Christmas as God enters our world to help us recognise what's truly important and respond to our calling to work for the Kingdom where the priorities of God are placed ahead of our own fleeting wishes and desires.

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