

## **A Stewardship Sermon preached at St Mary's, Warwick Advent Sunday 2010**

The Bible has always taken a curiously ambiguous approach towards wealth and money. So, if we take just two examples from what's called the 'Wisdom Literature' of the Old Testament, Proverbs Chapter 10 says: *The wealth of the rich is their fortress; the poverty of the poor is their ruin* (Prov 10: 15); whilst the more world-weary writer of Ecclesiastes observes: *The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth with gain. This also is vanity* (Eccl 5: 10). And we can see the equivalent of these two contrasting views coming down to more recent times. For instance, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Irish writer and poet Oscar Wilde is reputed to have observed: "When I was young I used to think that money was the most important thing in life. Now that I am old, I know it is." But, by stark contrast, the 18<sup>th</sup> century English poet and writer Thomas Gray observed in his *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*:

*The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r, and all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
Await alike the inevitable hour: the paths of glory lead but to the grave.*

In its simplest form the puzzle posed by scripture and experience is: Do money and wealth represent God's rich blessing or God's vain curse? And we shall come back to that question in a moment. But, why are we thinking about these matters on Advent Sunday?

The first answer is practical and the second is theological. First, St Mary's is blessed with a beautiful building and wonderful worship but both of these things come with a considerable price-tag. Every five years our architect undertakes a detailed survey of the church fabric outlining the work we need to do. There is getting on for £1m of repairs that are required to St Mary's. Our organ is also in need of restoration and for a number of years we've been exploring how we might create some *social* space to serve our congregation and our visitors. However, we can't make a start on these projects until we put St Mary's own financial house in order and that's a constant challenge. In time's past we might have been able to rely on the King Henry VIII Endowed Trust to shoulder much of that burden but the financial settlement agreed at the time of the new Warwick Team left St Mary's with a sizable hole in our budget year-on-year. We've addressed this over time by a stewardship campaign 5 years ago; a significant reduction of our admin costs (e.g. our Parish Secretary was not replaced upon her retirement and we've moved out of Church House); and we've also drawn upon our reserves. But if we're to go to other bodies and ask for funds to maintain and develop St Mary's ministry we need to ensure that we're not running an annual deficit on our budget.

That's why we'll be running another stewardship campaign in the New Year. And for regular viewers that should come as no surprise. Despite the ongoing support from the King Henry Trust, St Mary's is now a church like any other church where regular stewardship campaigns are a fact of life. So when we ran our last one five years ago the Diocesan Stewardship Advisor said then, expect to run one at least every five years. That's where we are now.

And the second answer to the question: *Why are we thinking about these matters on Advent Sunday?* is because one of the important themes for Advent is 'preparation'. The purple colour of the season indicates this is a time for deep reflection and thought upon God's grace as we prepare to celebrate the great feast of God's love becoming incarnate in the Christ-child, Jesus. And that brings us back to the question with which we started:

Do money and wealth represent God's rich blessing or God's vain curse? And exploring that mystery takes us deep into the heart of God.

If we start on the surface then two contemporary issues immediately present themselves; most commonly called: (i) Tithing; and (ii) The 'Prosperity Gospel'. First and briefly, tithing is the Old Testament teaching whereby God demands: *a tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees* because it all *belongs to the Lord* (Lev 27: 30). This basic precept of Mosaic law developed into a figure of 10%, which included everything – even spices and condiments like dill, mint and cumin (as we see when Jesus speaks about the matter in Mt chapter 23). Second and equally briefly, the 'Prosperity Gospel' is based on certain parts of the Old Testament (such as Deuteronomy, Jeremiah and the Psalms) which suggest that if we're faithful to God's commandments then God will bless with an *abundance of prosperity and security* (Jer 33: 6) and *he will give you the desires of the heart* (Ps 37: 4).

Now, as Christians, we need to treat these ideas with some care, e.g. tithing is part of the Law of Moses – some of which we accept (such as the 10 Commandments) and some of which we don't (such as circumcision). Tithing was part of a system for an agricultural and non-money based economy without a *developed* structure of state government or taxes. Jesus himself was critical of the system of tithing when he objects to the religious authorities giving one tenth of their *spices* but neglecting the more *important* matters of the law. And as for the modern notion of a 'Prosperity Gospel' – the Old Testament does teach that God answers prayer, particularly those of the faithful crying out for necessities but there is little to suggest God intends to make the rich richer simply because they ask and trust that God is capable of giving material blessings.

So what should be the basis of our Advent reflections about wealth and stewardship? Well, if we look beneath the surface of tithing and the generosity of God we can see some important theological principles at work, particularly in our theology of creation. At heart the Bible teaches that everything we have – whether that's ourselves and our abilities; our lives and those we share and have shared them with; any wealth or material blessings – all come from God our Creator. Although we may use our gifts in such a way as to earn money or a wage; and buy a house or a car; the God of Creation is the ultimate source of *all* we are and *all* we have. And *without* that source, without our Creator we would not exist and would be nothing. In that respect Thomas Gray's austere observation from his *Elegy* with which we started holds true:

*The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r, and all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
Await alike the inevitable hour: the paths of glory lead but to the grave.*

But hidden in those rather forlorn words is a liberating seed of hope. *If* the God of Creation is the beginning and source of all we have; then God is *also* end and summation of all life as well. We come from God and return to God and all we have along the way also comes from God. This provides the essential *Old* Testament theological framework for us as we reflect this Advent upon how we're stewards of God's gifts and in three weeks we'll revisit this topic and look at what Advent light the *New* Testament sheds on this important matter.

*The Revd Vaughan S Roberts  
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