

Good Money

St. Brandon's

Amos 5:6-7,10-15; Mark 10:17-31

10 October 2021

I think the Church is probably to blame. There's hardly a week goes by when we're not commemorating some saint or other, besides all the festivals we celebrate. So St Francis of Assisi was last Monday (appropriate since we included his 'Canticle of the Creatures' in last Sunday's service); William Tyndale, translator and martyr, last Wednesday. And of course, as Church here, we're the same – Harvest and Climate Sunday, recently, Shoebox Sunday next week. There's hardly a week goes by ... And just as the Church has, perhaps, invented the idea of marking so many 'events', so now does society – I hope you didn't miss the International Homeless Animals Day in August, but if you did don't worry there's always next year. So, what was this week's event? Hands up if you knew that it was Good Money Week!¹ A secular 'event', though with the engagement of at least one Christian organisation. And, coincidentally perhaps, that links to our readings this morning – so more on that later.

The key character in our gospel reading is of course the rich man who had, well if not a lot of money, at least a lot of possessions. And it is wealth and riches in general, rather than money in particular, that Jesus focuses on in his warnings about how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God. One of the interesting aspects of the conversation between the rich man and Jesus is the way that Jesus, in response to the man's opening gambit, first focuses on God – 'no one is good except God alone' – but then, instead of working through the commandments from the beginning as might seem logical, He jumps to commandments 6 to 9 (murder, adultery, theft, false witness), then adds an extra one (defrauding), before going back to number 5 (honouring parents). He thereby omits numbers 1 to 4 (putting God first, not having idols, not taking God's name in vain, and honouring the Sabbath), and also number 10 (covetousness).

The rich man happily confirms that he has kept all the commandments Jesus has mentioned since his youth. But then comes the knock-out punch. 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me'. And what Jesus is doing in that statement and demand is adding back in commandments 1, 2 and 10 – putting God first, not having idols, not coveting. Jesus, as always, is able to look into the heart of the man, and see that it was attachment to his material possessions which was making participation in the Kingdom of God impossible for him. He also, of course, personalises what participation in the Kingdom of God now involves – 'come, follow me'.

Now the first and obvious question for us is whether Jesus' demand of the rich man – 'go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor' – has general application. Do we all need to do that if we are to enter the Kingdom of God? Well, if so, the Treasurer's appeal to consider our financial giving to the Church (coming up later, but you'd already guessed that that was the inevitable follow-up to this sermon!), would fall rather flat – 'we haven't got any, we gave it all away!' So no, the specific demand of Jesus is to that particular rich man, though that of course does not mean that it may not

¹[Good Money Week](#)

apply to any of us. We may also be like the rich man, keeping the commandments, but not actually able to free ourselves from our possessions and wealth, and put God first. They may have become our idols. We may still covet them.

But Jesus then makes a statement which does have general application, which is, in effect, 'beware wealth and possessions'. It's not impossible to enter the Kingdom of God if you have them, for with God all things are possible. But, it can be difficult, so watch out! And, as a bit of an aside, this puts the mockers on the so called 'wealth gospel' – that wealth is a blessing from God (as the disciples clearly believed), so if you have it you know you're blessed, and if you don't you know you're not.

But what does being beware of wealth and possessions actually involve? Well one question that it would have been interesting to ask the rich man, but also therefore ourselves, is, 'Where did your wealth come from in the first place?' His answer, like ours perhaps, might have been inheritance or his own hard work. But if so, then the next question is, 'And was and is no one being exploited in that process? Is your wealth at the expense of others?' That, of course, takes us to our OT reading where Amos, along with a number of the other OT prophets, rails against the oppression of the poor: 'Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone'. Their wealth was at others' expense, and they can expect the judgement and justice of God: 'but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine'.

One way of thinking about this is in terms of violence. Violence is not only physical but can take many forms. How had the people in Amos's day done violence to others who then became or were forced to remain poor, in a way that amounted to economic violence? How, in our day, do lengthy supply chains incorporate modern slavery or more general exploitation, low wages, poor working conditions and so on. How are we complicit in this even if it is only indirectly, so that our wealth, our purchases, our possessions are built on injustice and perhaps violence? Particularly in our day, we can and should extend this to the environment. How have we exploited and done violence to the environment, both climate and bio-diversity, to gain the wealth we have? One of the points coming out of COP26 is that in *every* financial decision we should put the climate first.

Now that takes us into very broad territory, but I think we can extend it even further than climate. So here are some questions we might ask ourselves, beyond the question 'where did our wealth come from in the first place?':

- What do we spend our money on? We all have spending power, and every purchase sends a signal to the market. How do we use it for good?
- How do we otherwise use the possessions we have – house, car, chain saw and so on – towards the common good?
- Most of us will have or be saving towards a pension. In many, though not all pensions, there are ethical investment options. Have we / can we access those?
- Where do we bank? Do we know our bank's values and practices? Who do they lend to? Could we switch to a more ethical bank?
- If we have savings beyond our current account balance, where are they invested, and to what end? There are plenty of ethical and sustainable options now available.

- What about our wills? Where and to whom will the residual value of our estate go? How will that help to build a just and sustainable future?
- And last, though by no means least, how much do we give, and to which causes?

Now that's a pretty big agenda, but I think a logical and practical extension to the basic issue that Jesus raises of being beware of our wealth and possessions. But help is at hand. If you want a Christian approach to all of this, I'd recommend you have a look at Money Makes Change² – easy enough to find through an online search using an ethical search engine, though I'll also put a link into the sermon which will be put up on the Church website. Money Makes Change helps us to find answers to most of those questions, as well as providing some more reflective resources, including something on Messy Money to go with Messy Church. Money Makes Change was involved in Good Money Week that I mentioned earlier. And I need to acknowledge a personal though not a financial interest, in that I'm a Trustee of the organisation that runs Money Makes Change.³

But let me end with a personal reflection. Yes, Alison and I have asked ourselves all those questions at one time or another, and arrived at answers which we're mostly happy with, though they always warrant further reflection. And yet despite that, I think I (I wouldn't say we) still cling rather too anxiously to our money and possessions. If I'm honest, I think I'm still rather hedging my bets that I can both retain our wealth and possessions and enter the Kingdom of God through the eye of the needle. And I still need to remain open to the possibility that Jesus's words to the rich man are directed to me in particular. But I'm sure that won't apply to any of you.

Amen

²[Money Makes Change – ECCR](#)

³[ECCR – The Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility](#)