

## Sermon for Trinity 21 (12<sup>th</sup> October 2008)

Wednesday was quite a day. Like me, you probably woke up to hear the next installment in the saga of the financial institutions. Later, I went in to St Mary's School and talked to the children about what it is to be a Christian; I then got an email from Derek about the potential cost of repairs to the church building next year. Later I spoke to someone very worried about a possible return of cancer; and I rounded the day off with prayers for Burghfield with other Christians. And people say vicars only work on Sundays!

I'm not trying to impress you with how much I do, because the Christian life and Christian ministry aren't about busyness, but our growing relationship with God. The reason I've told you all this is because I have felt led – against my inner sense of cowardice – to speak to you today about money and the church's ministry. You have appointed me as your priest, and it's my role to pray for you, encourage and uphold you, but also to do some straight talking on the difficult issues we'd rather not face. As far as the international financial crisis is concerned, though my heart goes out to people who've lost their jobs or homes, or who risk losing them, I have to say I'm not sorry that the whole edifice of greed and selfish acquisition that has scarred our society for so long is facing reality at last. I pray that what will replace it will be more equitable financial systems with stricter ethical guidelines.

But I want to talk about something closer to home – our church finances. I make no apology for devoting the sermon to talking about money because Jesus thought money was important enough to the work of the kingdom to talk about people and money in 16 of the 29 parables recorded in the gospels (that's more than half). Talking about money isn't a something we should avoid in church. We need money to live, and the church needs money to do God's work of effectively spreading the gospel in our communities.

So here it is – church finances are projected to be £6K in deficit by the end of the year. If we were a household we'd be defaulting on our mortgage. Our income simply isn't enough to cover our outgoings. I'm doing everything I can to find ways to renegotiate our parish share, increase our income and decrease our expenditure. And I have to tell you that I've put a stop on all non-urgent expenditure until the end of the year. That means that I can't buy any more outreach materials to use when I go in to our schools; it means stopping the newsletter until the end of the year; it means having to think very hard about the sustainability of heating this building for worship for a few hours a week when we have a warm, comfortable building next door. These are hard choices, and I didn't want to make them – maintenance is not what I want my ministry to be about here, and it's not what your ministries should be about. But our parish share and running costs are non-negotiable. Some of you, I know, have strong feelings about the parish share – well so do I. I haven't got time today to talk in detail about it, but I will next Sunday, so if you can't be here then, talk to me today or this week. But I can tell you that I think we get very good value from the £47K we pay in parish share.

Several people have offered me sums of money since I've been here, for this project or that. In fact, you'll know that the PCC had an away day a couple of weeks ago – which cost the church nothing, by the way – and we discussed, among other things, our hopes and dreams for the church and community; they were wonderful and inspiring, and I pray that we can realise them and work together to make known the kingdom of God in Burghfield. But in order to do that, we must be financially viable. You know the stories of Jesus' itinerant ministry. We think about it with dewy eyes sometimes, Jesus, with no home and no means, going about doing good. Well yes, but in Luke ch8 we hear about the women who supported Jesus from their own pockets. And Jesus appointed a treasurer – Judas – we just hope our treasurer, Eric, won't come to such a sticky end.

Let's balance this with today's readings, neither of which talks about money. What do they say to us in this situation? Our gospel reading is a glorious picture of God's generosity. God invites all his friends to a great feast for his Son. When they break his heart by refusing his invitation, he invites anyone and everyone. God's celebration was not cancelled, his generosity is and will always be. There was a wonderful party – and it's name was heaven.

But one guest wasn't wearing the clothes provided by the host. What's that all about? Not about wearing the right clothes to church! It touches on our first reading, when Paul tells the people from the church at Philippi to think about whatever is true, and honourable and just and pleasing and commendable, excellent and worthy of praise – the things of Christ – then the God of peace would be with them. You see, the clothes to be worn by the guests at the great feast are clothes given to them by the host, not the clothes they have provided for themselves. What God in Christ gives us is the grace to be as he is, good, just, honourable, full of truth and generous to a fault. And if we are to receive the fullness of what God has for us, then we will clothe ourselves not in the things that we think are suitable for the occasion, but in the gift given us by our generous God.

The way we live and give, I am certain, needs to come not from a sense of duty or worse, a sense of obligation or guilt, but from a deep knowledge of what God has given us already, free, which we can never earn nor ever hope to repay. That gift is life – bought for us because of what Christ did on the cross and by his resurrection. When we know the immeasurable worth of that gift in our hearts, then we respond in the only way we can, with love and service that gives of our best to God, that gives to God not from what is left over at the end of the month, but gives to God first in love and gratitude. This must be our response to God, with the same generous hearts as he has given to us.

I'm not trying to make you feel guilty today or trying to persuade you to give more to God's work in Burghfield; I'm simply telling you the truth about our finances and reminding you of God's generosity to you. And I'm asking you to go home and pray hard about what your response will be. I've made my response as I was writing this sermon, and I've got round to

something I've been meaning to do for ages but just hadn't done, I've increased my giving to church. Please pray about your response, not from duty or guilt, but from love and generosity.

Now that's been a long and hard message to hear and a hard one to deliver, so I want to end with a story ...

Two members of St Elsewhere's Church, Sarah (a woman with Down's Syndrome) and Jean (her friend), were in church one Sunday as usual. As the plate came round for the offering, Jean reminded Sarah that it was time to get her money from her pocket. Sarah reached into her pocket and picked out two coins, a shiny new 2p piece and a rather dull pound coin. She stood there for a while looking at the coins trying to decide which one to give. She picked up the pound coin and was about to put it in the plate, when she suddenly changed her mind and took the 2p piece instead and put it in the offering plate. And as she did this, Jean saw her smile broadly and heard her say 'No, the big shiny one for Jesus'!

Blessings  
Gill