

Serving two masters? God and wealth

St. Brandon's

Amos 8:4-7; Luke 16: 1-13

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I think the version of the bible which we use has gone slightly PC. "Dishonest wealth"? – well, how about the good old King James Version: "the mammon of unrighteousness" or even "filthy lucre"?¹ Actually, the PCC spent much of its meeting on Thursday talking about filthy lucre – sorry, money! "Money received from the Heritage Lottery Fund is filthy lucre – discuss." (That would be my starting point for the post-sermon discussions of which there will be more shortly – though not today!)

But I guess you might have thought that the parable in our gospel reading was not exactly clear, and quite how it got on to "dishonest wealth", or the lesson we are supposed to take away from it, you might have thought was equally difficult. Well, I'll come back to the parable and the lesson it contains, and the subsequent discussion towards the end. But let's start at the end, as it were, with Jesus' warning: "You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve God and wealth [God and mammon]".

To Jesus' listeners this really hit home because the OT understanding was that wealth was a blessing from God – though only so long as it wasn't obtained through exploitation, as the reading from Amos makes clear. So the Pharisees, who were listening in, ridiculed Jesus for what he had just said. And in the verse which follows our reading, it records that the Pharisees were "lovers of money" (Luke 16:14). And that's because they held to the OT view of wealth being a blessing. And when Jesus said, a couple of chapters later in Luke's gospel, that it was "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (18:25), the whole crowd asked "Then who can be saved?" (18:26). And that's the OT view again – surely wealth is a blessing from God?

But Jesus wanted to challenge that understanding. Wealth is dangerous, it is easy to become enslaved to it, easy to have wealth as an idol, to bow down to the gods of possessions and materialism. "And [Jesus] said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions'" – Luke's gospel again (12:15).

Jesus' words about camels, needles, the rich and the kingdom of God follow His words earlier in Luke's gospel to the ruler to whom Jesus said, "Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (18:22). And the ruler became sad, you may remember, because he was very rich. And Luke's gospel also contains the parable of the rich man who had a good crop and decided to build bigger barns. "And I will say to my soul, soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat and be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you." "So it is", Jesus said, "with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God" (Luke 12:19-21).

And those words are, of course, similar to Jesus' words towards the end of the Beatitudes, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:19-21).

Well, you've probably got Jesus' message by now! Wealth is dangerous stuff! You really cannot serve both God and mammon. There is real spiritual danger in becoming enslaved to wealth – and you can become

¹ Filthy lucre was actually the KJV translation of Titus 1:10-11: "Deceivers ... whose mouths must be stopped ... teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake".

enslaved whether you've got it and want to keep it and maybe increase it, or whether you haven't got it but desiring it becomes an obsession. There's what I think is a true story of someone who used those fridge magnets in the form of letters to write on the side of the fridge, "The one who dies with the most toys wins". Well, I think Jesus is saying, "The one who dies with the most toys loses, actually".

But there is, of course, a difficulty here. We need some wealth, obviously – we very simply could not live without it. And most of us are not called to be ascetics, or to sell everything we have and give to the poor. Indeed, didn't God make the world as a place of abundance, a brilliant place to enjoy? And for that, we need wealth, possessions, "goods" – and they, generally, are "goods" not "bads". And St Paul helps here when he says in his letter to Timothy that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6: 10). So it's not money itself, wealth itself, but the love of it which is problematic. So how do we live with such wealth as we have, but in such a way that it doesn't enslave us, so that we don't serve wealth but are free from any kind of love of it? How might we even use it to serve God?

Well, our OT reading gives us some principles. First, don't prioritise wealth creation: "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath that we offer wheat for sale?" In other words, get rid of any grasping attitude which relegates other more important things, like respect for the Sabbath. Wealth creation has its place – but leave it there. Avarice and greed are vices to be avoided.

Second, don't exploit others in gaining your wealth – don't "trample the needy and bring ruin to the poor of the land". Don't use false balances, or enslave others. And while this may be obvious, it is probably even more difficult in our day than in biblical times now that supply chains are long and complicated, and competition to drive down prices is so severe that it's almost inevitable that someone, somewhere (and usually the poor and those who cannot easily defend themselves) loses out.

Supermarkets and others now go to great lengths to try to ensure that their supply chains are "traceable". But we still get stories of sweat shops and exploitation. We still get tragedies like the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh in 2013 where 1,138 workers in a garment factory lost their lives – a factory from which companies like H&M, Walmart and Gap purchased their supplies. Probably the single biggest difference which Fair Trade has made is in drawing attention to the need for companies to make their supply chains 'clean'. And yet, many products we buy are probably tainted in some way. Apple and Samsung were challenged by a Friends of the Earth investigation which looked at the incredible environmental degradation, and appalling working conditions, on the Indonesian island of Banka, all to extract the tin which goes into their mobile phones and tablets.² And that's the problem – all of us are almost certainly compromised on a daily basis by the things we buy. And there's a sense in which maybe we are handling "dishonest wealth", even if we wouldn't have intended it that way. We might even be "trampling on the needy" and "bringing to ruin the poor of the land", almost without knowing it. So while we need at least enough wealth to live, such wealth as we have may be tainted in some way.

Well that's been, in one sense, an extremely long introduction to the parable in our gospel reading! What else might we learn from that? The meaning, as I said earlier, isn't exactly clear, but one explanation runs like this. The manager was lending out money from the rich man's estate (that was his job) and expecting payment in kind – olive oil, wheat and so on. In lending out the money, the manager was imposing an interest rate – somewhere between 25% on the wheat and 100% on the olive oil – and he would be pocketing most of this. It could be that such high interest rates would have led to defaults on the loans – and hence the charge that he was "squandering" his master's property, and hence the reason for him being given the sack.

² Friends of the Earth (2012), 'Mining for smartphones: the true cost of tin.'

Now, we might have expected him to get in as much money as possible while he had the chance. But instead he reduced the amounts owed, possibly back to the original amount lent. And the rich man praised him, not for his morality, but for his astuteness, because he'd figured out that long-lasting friendships might well be more valuable to him in the future than short-term cash.

Well, that may be a reasonable explanation of the parable, and it would seem to work at the 'horizontal' level between the man and his 'friends' – who presumably didn't know that he was about to get the sack. But then Jesus, rather startlingly, applies this to the 'vertical' dimension – “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes”. And all of a sudden it's back to wealth having spiritual and eternal consequences. We should make friends with our worldly wealth so that we'll be welcomed in heaven. And why? Because if we haven't been faithful in such things as these, with the wealth we've received wherever it's come from, then how can we be trusted with true riches?

And this isn't, therefore, only about the 10% of our income which we might give away, but the other 90% as well, and where it has all come from. We should be using 100% of the wealth we have in the service of God, making friends with it, demonstrating that we can be trusted with it.

And what might that mean in practice? Well, pretty obviously, hospitality and not just amongst those who will invite us back. Being generous in giving and sharing whatever wealth we have. Trying to buy well – Fair Trade and environmentally friendly products, not buying from organisations which have poor track records in taking social and environmental responsibilities seriously. Trying to invest ethically including influencing where our pensions are invested. And generally just sitting light to wealth and possessions, not storing up treasure for ourselves on earth, but instead trying to be rich towards God.

So, in summary, wealth is essential but dangerous – it has serious spiritual consequences. We cannot serve two masters simultaneously. The one who dies with the most toys loses. So the lesson seems to be: don't prioritise wealth creation; try not to exploit others in gaining wealth in the first place; use wealth wisely and generously, making friends with it; sit light to it. And prioritise and pursue and store up the true riches which come from first seeking to serve God, not mammon.

Amen