

Declaring War on Wealth
28th Sunday, Year B
11 October 2009

As we know from back to church Sunday, the Anglican Church is very keen to encourage potential new members. In 101 little ways we are being encouraged to put out the red carpet for people who come along to try us out.

Back in the days of Jesus, when the core group consists of 12 insiders, they are even more motivated to attract desirable future activists. Imagine their delight then when this morning's neophyte turns up. He is young, bright, devout, highly motivated, and wealthy. Any parish today that was on the ball would be delighted to make him welcome – "please can we introduce you to the planned giving stewardship recorder."

So imagine the disciple's astonishment and dismay when Jesus behaves in such an off-putting way to this highly desirable potential recruit. Nor does he leave it there. Having burned off such a promising young leader, he then proceeds to hoe into their culture's core assumptions about the desirability of wealth and possessions.

Jewish religion, like a number of the other major world religions, doesn't have a problem with people having a lot of money. Be generous, give to the poor and to your religion, but there is no need to feel ashamed about your good fortune. In fact it may well be a sign of God's blessing. That is what the disciples have been brought up to believe.

What an embarrassment the teaching of Jesus is on this score! Throughout the ages preachers have resorted to ingenious explanations to get their

congregations off the hook, and leaving church that morning in a comfortable frame of mind. Their get out of jail free cards are usually of three different kinds.

The eye of a needle is said to be a gate in a city wall bigger than a man, and just big enough for a camel to squeeze through if it kneels, and takes some of the load off. So the moral of the story is that if the rich are humble, and get rid of some of the burden of their heavily laden wallets to worthy causes, then they will be all right on the day of judgement. But that slick explanation completely subverts what Jesus was saying. Disinvestment and donation and come follow me was the prescription for the rich young man, not lighten the load a little. All wealth is a barrier to getting in to the Kingdom.

The next line of defence is that Jesus had two categories of followers – those who had taken to the open road as itinerant missionaries, and those who stayed at home to support them by providing meals and accommodation as they made their rounds. But the trouble with dividing the church into an A team and a B team is that very few people want to volunteer to join the activist cadre, and the B team tends to heave a sigh of relief that a small minority are setting a such an inspiring example that they personally have no intention of living in to. In fact they tend to take it as a license to live well below that standard of Christian conduct. It is also an embarrassing fact that it is hard to find Jesus actually saying anywhere in the New Testament that he wanted this kind of two-track membership of the Kingdom.

The other card that preacher's play – I have used this one myself in the past – is that Jesus asks

different things of different people according to the contours of their particular spiritual biography. The one thing that the rich young man needed to get rid of to spiritually advance was his money. Jesus would ask something else of us according to our spiritual profile, and our range of vulnerabilities and temptations.

But are we in fact prepared to face up to the kind of radical renunciation that this implies? If our particular give it up agenda is on the same demanding scale as the rich young man, could we face up to same kind of stand and deliver request that God is apparently highly likely to make? And this way of wriggling out of the plain meaning of Jesus' words this morning ignores the fact that what left the disciples aghast was their clear understanding that Jesus had got stuck in to all forms of wealth possession as being spiritually dangerous.

The teaching methods that Jesus uses as he asks us to go deeper in to what God expects of us in the Kingdom are, as usual, full of paradox and irony. In his stories he often commends crooks and con men as having attitudes that religious people could usefully learn from. They have an eye for the main chance, the ability to judge what is essential in a situation, the daring and the courage to do what is necessary for survival. If only religious people could be that shrewd in using the things of this world.

What is more Jesus doesn't have it in for rich people, or for those who got their wealth by ill-gotten means, such as the tax collectors. He is happy to eat with them, and to socialise with them. He is clear that God has come for them too. Jesus doesn't

have an agenda of political and social reform that leads on to forcible wealth redistribution.

So what are we to make of this highly demanding teaching as we try to apply it to our lives today? As with last Sunday's equally challenging teaching on the subject of divorce and re-marriage, Jesus always takes us back to the core issue that underlies a contested area of human behaviour. Last Sunday's issue was – what did God make human sexuality for? This Sunday's issue is – what is money for in God's scheme of things?

It seems to me that money is an energy flow that makes things happen in the world - it gives us choices and possibilities. We live in a society that depends upon wealth creation so that the rest of us can enjoy a reasonable standard of living. There are a relatively small percentage of the population of our society who have innate business skills. They well run companies employ people, generate exports, supply goods and services, and pay taxes. It is a pity New Zealanders don't support them more by investing in them through the share market, instead of pumping money into our favourite addictive sump hole, the housing market. These business skilled people should get on and do what they do well, and should do it with pride and conviction. They could usefully live by Wesley's famous dictum, "Earn as much as you can, save as much as you can, give away as much as you can."

Each one of us has an obligation to be responsible about our stewardship of money. That means, for instance, doing what we can within the limitations of our circumstances to make sure that we have made adequate arrangements about our retirement and our housing. It is not fair to just drift through life

hoping that someone else will sort that out for us. The advent of Kiwi Saver, and the current political debate about retirement incomes are a crucial opportunity for a rapidly ageing New Zealand population. Amongst the four natural virtues that Christians live by are prudence, which involves care and moderation with money, and temperance, moderation in needed things and abstinence from things that are not needed.

I am sure that Bishop Victoria would want to remind us at this point that faithful stewardship is one of the three priorities of the Diocesan strategic plan. Anglicans have been notorious for under funding their Church. A church that has been set free from money worries is a church that has been freed for mission. An annual review of our giving to our parish church is a normal part of effective Christian living.

Then too there is a call on each one of us for imaginative generosity. Bishop Victoria often tells the story of a married couple she knows who, as they prepared to celebrate a major wedding anniversary, decided that it would be selfish to spend a lot of money just on themselves at an expensive restaurant. Instead they cooked and served a lavish dinner at the local city mission night shelter on their big day. Recently there was television publicity about the local Korean taxi driver who serves a Sunday evening tea of sausages and pizza to the denizens of Latimer Square each week. It is his way of saying thank you for the privilege of being allowed to live in this country.

Are these all compromise measures that I am suggesting as we try to measure up that demanding teaching of Jesus this morning? You bet. It

represents where I am up to at this stage of my discipleship as I try to think what is required of us as we work back from a consideration of first principles of what God wants money to be for in the world.