**Church Sermon – 22 September-19**

**May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord and Redeemer. Amen**

John Wesley once said: “Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can”.

According to one of my favourite authors, Richard Foster, no one has ever attempted to reconcile Jesus’ statement that we cannot serve God and mammon (otherwise known as money) (Matthew 6: 24) with his concern that we are to make friends by any means with unrighteous mammon, today’s Gospel reading from the 16th chapter of Luke. This reconciliation is precisely what’s necessary - if we are to rightly understand the Bible’s witness to both the dark and light side of mammon (otherwise known as money).

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus tells a parable that has, apparently, tied many Bible commentators in knots and puzzled many Christians for centuries. And, perhaps, so it should, because this is an unusual story.

However, the story contains tremendous significance for today’s sermon and ongoing studies into the word of God and both sides of money.

The parable is simple enough. A wealthy man discovers that his steward or business manager has been mishandling his funds and immediately fires him. But before his termination, the steward devises an ingenious plan to sustain his future. He calls his employers’ creditors, and one by one, he writes off 20% to 50% of their debts. These people will be so thankful that when this person is out of a job, they will feel obliged to help him.

This plan is clever and just as obviously dishonest (and perhaps fraudulent). When the master finds out what the steward has done, rather than throw him into the prison as we might expect, he is so impressed by the man’s ingenuity that he commends him on his prudence.

**Comment**

One reason why us Christians find this passage difficult is that Jesus uses a dishonest act to teach an important spiritual truth. However, Christ never affirms the steward’s dishonesty. Rather, he highlights his shrewdness in using economic reasons for non-economic goals – that is using money to make friends so that when he needed it, he would have a place to go.

You see our biggest difficulty is with Jesus‘ own comments following the parable. He first notes that **the “sons of this world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light** (v8). Then Jesus says: “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon so that when it fails, they may receive you into eternal habitations” (v16). Basically, Jesus is telling us to use money in such a way that when it fails – and it will fail – we are still cared for.

We see two shocking things from this passage:

* That mammon (or money) is unrighteous
* That we are to use money to make friends

The two ideas seem so opposed from each other that we find it hard to believe that Jesus could have meant them both. The language is clear enough though. That mammon (or money) is unrighteous and that we are make friends with it.

When Christ spoke of unrighteous mammon, he was stressing the inherent fallenness of money. Unrighteous (or wicked and sinful) is as necessary a characteristic of money. In other words, money can provoke sinfulness and wickedness because that is its nature. This may be a hard pill to swallow because we want to believe mammon has no power over us. But by describing mammon as sinful and wicked, Jesus wanted us to avoid taking a naïve view of money. Some of us who have worked with money rarely take a neutral view of it also. Money can be poison if used in the wrong way and its power can be unlimited – used as a weapon, to bully people, demean people, change behaviour and so on. Money can also buy prestige. For example, you and I can buy the Lord of the Manor for £1,495, which lasts for a lifetime, I can leave it in the family, I can choose any place name like the Claydons and there’s investment potential (to sell it on for, say, £50k to £100k).

Dream on!

When we contrast today’s Gospel reading with the sixth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus begins by warning against laying up treasures on earth. Rather, we are to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven and this is for two main reasons: it is an investment that guarantees far greater security – neither moth, rust, thieves or anything can get to it. Second, it draws our affections – all of us – into the kingdom of God. Where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also. Treasure in the bank of heaven is an investment with a high return.

It is often said that we can’t take our money to heaven. Jesus is however saying that: **if we know what we are doing we can take it with us after all**. This might sound strange but the proper use of money is not for living down here – that would be a poor investment. The proper use of money is for investing as much as possible in the lives of people, so that we will have treasures in heaven. Of course, we need to keep a certain amount of money in order to carry on the day to day business of life, but we want to free up as much as we can in order to place it where the return is eternal.

**Children of Light**

As children of light, we are faced with the challenge of finding ways to convert filthy lucre into kingdom investments. Money, evil tendency and all, is to be mastered and turned into kingdom opportunities.

Perhaps there’s a needy neighbour next door, a famine in the continent of Africa, floods in the US or refugees from Venezuela or an opportunity to spread the gospel via an overseas mission. These are all wonderful investment opportunities. And we have many local opportunities like our church roofs at St Mary’s and St Michael’s, St Michael’s heating, community outreach and youth group.

**Using, not serving**

I believe now we have some understanding with today’s bible narratives to say “we are not to serve mammon and that we are make friends by means of unrighteous mammon. **Our mandate, as Christians, is to use mammon without serving mammon (or use money without serving money).**

We use mammon and not serve it when we allow God to determine our economic decisions. We must simply decide who is going to make our decisions.

For example, J Hudson Taylor would never have launched the great chapter in mission history called the China Inland Mission if he had let money decide. He was an ordinary person with few resources, yet once he had determined that God wanted him to go, he went. **God had made the decision, not money**. His master was God, and it was his Master that he served.

And so, the conflict we feel between today’s Gospel reading and the sixth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel is answered by learning to use money **without** serving money. But we must not be fooled: in the rough and tumble of life, we find the conflict is not quickly resolved. Very often those who try to make friends by using mammon end up serving mammon. We cannot serve mammon until we are absolutely clear that we are dealing with not just mammon, but unrighteous mammon. The spiritual powers that stand in the back of money and through which money lives and moves - has its being in the need to be conquered, neutralised and made a servant of Jesus Christ. The more we conquer money’s evil side, the more money is used for good rather than served – and the more it is a blessing, not a curse.

**Mastering Mammon**

**So, here are four examples of mastering mammon:**

Let’s listen to the biblical witness about money. Let’s find a marker pen to highlight references to money and possessions. The purpose is to saturate ourselves in God’s Holy Word. Next we turn to the Epistles with the same goal. Then we assemble all bible scriptures and separate into the light side of money and the dark side of money (with references). Do also add any references from the Old Testament.

Let’s consider money from a psychological and sociological perspective. This is to understand ourselves better with regards to money. So, do we fear money? Do we hate money? Do we love money? Does money produce pride or shame in us?

These two examples will assist us in building our understanding in order to turn them into actions like looking into our spend and, for example, looking at our wills unafraid of our own frailty. Now, we can control and manage money to the glory of God and the good of others.

A third step and, there are many others, is to gather a community of support that will stand with us in our struggle and affirm us in life-style changes. Those who are rich and powerful need understanding and compassion as much as those poor. The idea is to make these opportunities count for the Kingdom of God.

Finally, we bring the ministry of prayer into everything we do in relation to money. Money is a spiritual issue, and prayer is our chief weapon in the life of the spirit of God. Let us learn to pray for each other for the binding of greed and covetousness and the releasing of generosity. The idea is that we break the power of money in order to use it for God’s purposes, and place it under His Lordship.

Equally, let us also pray for each other. We need wisdom to be faithful with our resources. We pray for an increase in the gifts of wisdom and giving, we pray over how to budget money. We also pray for the freedom from money’s power and its provision for those that need it. And, should we give money away, we pray for it.

I am happy to have a discussion about this sermon and support you in prayer when needed.

**Be encouraged**

**Amen**