

Sunday 4th February 2018

Stewardship 1 David Raynor

2 Corinthians 8:1-15 Matthew 26:6-13

Hello and welcome to the first Stewardship Sermon of 2018! Do I hear an excited “Yay!”? No? Ah well, never mind.

I’m one of the members of the Parish Stewardship Committee and I was responsible for the leaflet that many of you will have received either last week or this. I had a lot of fun while creating it, looking for pictures on the internet. I’m particularly proud of the one’s that I managed to find that look a bit like Robin, Shola and Sue. We had a bit of a laugh with adding curly hair and pink glasses for Sue and whiskers on Robin’s chin. Anything to shift attention from the boring bits of the message.

I know it’s a boring topic talking about money and finances. But we have to have some boring sermons. It’s a little-known fact, but under Inland Revenue rules, if all our sermons were entertaining then we wouldn’t be able to claim Gift Aid on your donations! You are only allowed to tick the Gift Aid box if you are not receiving anything in return for your charitable donation. If all the sermons were entertaining, then it would be like paying to go to see a show. The Inland Revenue would consider that you had received a reward. So console yourselves that by putting up with me talking here, you are helping to pay for this church.

There are lots of stories about Jesus, or told by Jesus and many of them involve money or possessions. This is a bit odd, since he himself is not recorded as having any! There is no record of Jesus earning or spending money. Even when the Pharisees try to trick him with their question about paying taxes to Caesar, he has to ask one of them to show him a coin to illustrate his point.

And when Jesus tells his stories they often have a lot of apparent contradictions with each other. So for example, you have the parable of the talents, where three people are entrusted with huge amounts of money for their master and two of them make loads more, but the third buries it in a hole in the ground. In that story I think the money is a bit of a red herring – if you retold it in a different way,

then it makes sense. Imagine if it was a landowner delegating responsibility for fields to three workers. One worker takes care of five fields and grows lots of surplus crops, another has care of two fields and does likewise. The third doesn't know what his master wants him to do, so he leaves his field to go fallow. So it was a simple case of incompetence. The money was an irrelevance. That is simply a case of if you are trusted to do a job, then you should do it well.

In another parable, an important manager is not doing a very good job, so his master tells him he will be dismissed. Well, he attempts to ingratiate himself with all his master's customers by adjusting their bills downwards to save them significant amounts of money. Amazingly his master praises him for his shrewdness. Crucially, the manager hasn't done what many others might have done – he hasn't tried to steal anything for himself. In another parable, a rich farmer has had a bumper harvest and decides that he will build bigger barns to store it all, so he can live a life of ease. But God tells him that it was all a waste of time because he is going to die that very night. This one actually makes me uncomfortable at the moment as I approach retirement myself and find myself being tempted to build a few 'bigger barns' of my own.

The Gospel reading this morning is a story about Jesus rather than one told by him, but it also has interesting twists. A woman anoints Jesus with a bottle of perfume and is berated by the disciples because it was a waste of money. Now, if they had berated her because it was a waste of effort then it might have made sense. After all, Jesus and the rest of them were busy walking from place to place and by the time they had hiked to the next town the sweat and the dust would have worn away the nice smells. If Jesus was about to get married then maybe it would have made sense. But no – their objection was just on economic grounds. What they mean of course, is that THEY would have done it differently. We like to feel in control of finances. We like to feel that "If I had loads of money, I would spend it on this, this and this". Well, it was her perfume, her free choice, her gift to Jesus. The whole point of having possessions is that they are yours to dispose of as you wish.

One of the little jobs I have at St Francis is to take care of paying the organist. I get a cheque every 3 or 4 months from Duke and make up little envelopes of cash and pay the organist and they sign a little book and so on. Well every now and

then we get a guest organist, maybe a friend or relative of a member of the congregation or someone like that. When I go to pay them they are reluctant to take it. So I give them my little philosophical spiel about money. In my opinion all things belong to God. In the Eucharist we often say “All things come from you, and of your own do we give you”. So in my opinion that applies to money as well. Even if we have earned it, it was thanks to our God-given abilities. But there is one important point – the fact that we HAVE earned it – by honest work – gives us the right to decide how out of all the bountiful things that God gives us, how that money can be disposed of. Now there are many ways that you can dispose of money. And with the exception of any outright criminal acts, I think that money honestly earned should be disposed of in whatever way you think right. It may be that you want to donate it to charity. Or maybe you need to get your child some new shoes. Or it may be that for you, right now, the most sensible thing that you could do with it is to buy a couple of pizzas and a nice bottle of wine to share with your spouse or best friend or whatever. It’s your money and you have the right to dispose of it as you see fit. And goodness knows that Jesus obviously recognises the value of a good feast now and then – he told enough stories about them. And the same applies if you are a pensioner or on benefits. You are entitled to that money. Don’t let the Daily Mail stories of benefit scroungers get you down. You are entitled to it, so it’s yours.

So don’t beat yourselves up about the occasional treat. I say this as a guy with a double chin who really should cut down on the treats himself.

I think the underlying thing that Jesus is trying to say with his stories involving money is that we need to beware of letting our relationship with money get in the way with our relationship with each other and our relationship with God. If we are thinking about how to make the most money for ourselves and ignoring those around us who are struggling, then we have the wrong relationship with money. It’s not wrong to enjoy the good things if you have them, providing that you remember your neighbours who may be in need. Christians often get accused of being killjoys, of never wanting to have fun. Well, I’m telling you now that there is nothing wrong with wanting to have a good time. It only gets to be a problem if you are having fun at someone else’s expense, or having a good time when everyone around you is struggling to get by.

We are told to love our neighbour, and encouraged to give to the needy. It is possible to give without loving. But I don't think it is possible to love without giving. Even if all you have to give is yourself, your time, your company, the way you show love is by giving.

In today's New Testament reading, St Paul praises the congregation in Macedonia for their generosity, saying that they are even giving beyond their means. This has echoes of when Jesus praised the widow for giving her last two small copper coins to the temple in Jerusalem. Now I get why he praised her giving – he was comparing the rich with their offerings with her poverty and her offering. Her offering was a true sacrifice, theirs were small change.

Now I have to say, I find myself feeling very uncomfortable about standing here and trying to draw parallels between this and our situation here. I'm sure that the old woman did indeed give all that she had. But I get the feeling somehow that she didn't face having her electricity cut off, or being evicted for non-payment of rent. Not least because electricity hadn't been discovered yet. And I can just see the tabloid headline now "Religious nutcase asks congregation to give all their money to the church".

So no, I'm not going to say "Please give all your money to the church". But I am going to lay my cards on the table. We have managed to keep good control of our finances in recent years. Duke, the parish treasurer usually manages to balance the books. I think that means he holds one in each hand or whatever it is that accountants do. But last year, we didn't get as much income as we had budgeted. We were down by about £10,000 in total. The PCC has done a sterling job at looking at the finances, and we have trimmed the budget for 2018 as much as we can. We are not in immediate danger of going broke, but unless we can increase our income it means that we will have to dig into our reserves.

We are very lucky in this parish to have two full-time priests and a curate, and three churches. These do cost money. Many people think that the Church of England is paid for by the state, but it isn't. Oh we get some help, like any charity does, by being able to claim Gift Aid on donations. We are even able to do this to an extent with cash donations. And we make some money by letting out our church halls to local user groups or for private parties. But the majority of our income comes from regular stewardship donations.

Now there are a couple of ways that we could increase our income. We could try to charge more for our hall lettings, but we think that we are charging as much as we can – some groups have closed recently in fact, because they can't make ends meet.

If you can, search your hearts and try to increase your regular giving. Or if you don't give regularly already, please have a word with one of the people in the church such as the sidespersons and they can get you the information.

One really good way to increase our income would be for us to increase our congregations. Swell our numbers and swell our coffers. So please, go out and tell your neighbours and invite them to come. As an incentive, you can tell them that we've used up our quota of boring sermons already for this year!

Thank you for listening.