

## **Money Matters;**

### **Leicester Cathedral 19 October 2008**

A recent Dave Walker cartoon illustrated that great ecclesiastical phenomenon the collection: the ritual which is part of most public services of worship.

On the one hand, the cartoon illustrated the items in the collection plate which will make the church treasure smile. They include

Banknotes: legal tender, preferably from a solvent state.

Direct debit instruction forms...filled out in full.

And sweets (nice ones)

And on the other hand are the items which will make the church treasurer sad when found in the collection plate. They include

buttons: even pretty ones

Uplifting messages, with or without biblical quotations

And children or animals, even well behaved ones.

But why is it that collections feature so consistently, perhaps more consistently than other parts of the liturgy?

Perhaps that is a question which the gospel today helps to answer, even if obliquely. Because it is an illustration of how money matters.

I suspect we are all more aware of how much money matters now than maybe a year ago. I spent this week with the draft cathedral budget for 2009 on my desk, and the FTSE reports up on my computer, trying to find wisdom about this cathedral's income next year. I stand in a long line of clergy who have taken money very seriously: it was a monk who invented double entry bookkeeping, in order to enable his order to give an account of its business in farming and trade, and the Church Commissioners have, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, been charged with husbanding the finances of the church in order to support the work of dioceses, cathedrals, parishes and clergy of the nation, particularly in areas of deprivation. They currently have a £5Bn fund. Or it was 5Bn. As an aside, I was tickled to see, this week, a share certificate for a

business which originated in the town where I grew up: the Anglican Coal, Smelting and Reduction Company. It felt an apt caption for the last week's headlines.

Today's gospel puts these financial preoccupations in context. Jesus has become the focus of concern for the religious leaders. They determine to catch him out. They send their disciples (they don't have the courage to turn up themselves) and they flatter Jesus: 'teacher we know that you are sincere, teach the ways of God, show no partiality'. Their words are unmatched in the gospels, accurately analysing Jesus' authority. Others would be beguiled. Jesus recognises their duplicity.

'Show me the coin used for the tax'.

Here is something with great power. It has power because of what it can do: in this case pay the tax, get the Roman authorities off the tax payer's back. It buys a sort of freedom. And it represents empire. On its face is the emperor's head and title. The coin is a vehicle of propaganda: it reminded users of the power of Rome, of the significance of the emperor. And this coin had power to trap Jesus 'Is it lawful to pay taxes...or not?. Say yes, and he is a collaborator, say no, and he is a subversive. And Jesus said: render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

Here is a response of significance and subtlety. Here is an incident which is about power, and has at its heart the threat of being beguiled, and culminates the identification of what us of ultimate significance.

When Jesus asked for a coin he asked: 'whose image is here: whose Ikon'. The coin bears Caesar's ikon, and belongs to Caesar. Humans, on the other hand, bear the ikon of God. They may pay the infamous poll tax, but they do not belong to the emperor, they belong to God. They may be told to obey Caesar's laws, but they hold in their hearts the commands of the Lord. They may live in the Roman Empire, but their King is not in Rome.

Money is a good test of that tension. Money matters. We know its power: with it, we do have a sort of freedom. Unchosen poverty brings with it profound powerlessness. But the power of money is beguiling, and all of us can succumb. A Punch cartoon this week showed the aftermath of some retail therapy. He, standing (and it is a sexist cartoon, but it was in Punch)

looks at her, flopped in an armchair surrounded by carrier bags and he says 'there seems to have been a severe failure of financial regulation'. But the power of money is not ultimate. We are not made in the image of Caesar, but in the image of God, and are given the offer of God's glorious liberty.

There are many people around us who simply don't know how to cope in our changed economic environment. There are those, obviously, who need help and support from specialists: those who are now in crisis, fearful of redundancy, in spiralling debt, threatened by repossession. There are many more who simply don't know how to find a new way of living. As one twenty year old told me yesterday: I simply don't know how to enjoy myself without going out and spending money. There was a real sense of living in Caesar's pocket. And no sense of being God's ikon.

Into that sort of bemusement and lostness, and hopelessness the Christian tradition offer a range of responses.

Most starkly there is the option of chosen poverty. It is significant, perhaps, that Jesus did not have a denarius, he had to ask for one. It is certain that many of his followers down the ages, from Peter to Francis, to Theresa, have joyfully embraced poverty, and the powerlessness it brings, and discovered within that discipline a new richness in community, in interdependence, in simplicity. That is the narrow way. Others take a broader way, going for a walk instead of to the shops, going to the library rather than the bookshop, learning to garden, or make bread, or knit, or cycle, planning a different sort of Christmas. Others are courageous enough to remain within Caesar's empire but working for another Kingdom. Mark Speaks is an Anglican priest licensed to St Botolph's Aldgate, and a senior fund manager in the City of London. He handles ethical investment funds, and wrestles with the hard issues of how to handle money ethically, as he says, trying to be as wise as a serpent and as harmless as a dove in an increasingly risky world. And there are others. So far few bankers have been prepared to face the press, even Fewer still have stood up and admitted that remuneration in their industry was one of the causes of the credit crunch. And none have done so who are as influential as Stephen Green, chairman of the world's second largest bank, HSBC. Stephen Green is also an Anglican priest in the Diocese of London.

They need our prayers.

But back to where I began: perhaps all this sheds a little more light on why we have a collection. Of course the money that is given is powerful in mundane ways: it keeps this cathedral open, and staffed, and safe. It does the ordinary stuff of ordinary kingdoms. And we are profoundly grateful. But there is something more significant going on. Our coinage has on it the Queen's head. It also has the initials FD, defender of the faith. The Queen acknowledges, on her own coinage, an authority beyond her own. And in our church collections we do something which is a sign of that other authority, that other kingdom. We know money matters, so we do something in one sense crazy: we hand it over, enabling God's work to be done. Money matters: and mysteriously giving it creates a new community, enabling relationships to be formed and transformed. We hand it over to seal our commitment to our Lord and to each other. Money matters: mysteriously giving it is a means of grace. We hand it over as a token of God's world where bonds are formed through sociability, not calculation, saying 'all things come from you, and of your own do we give you' ....