

## **A sermon preached at St John's College, Cambridge**

*The last Sunday after Trinity*

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### 'Wealth'

At a recent reunion with very old friends, conversation turned with one to the recent sale of his business. The distribution of the proceeds was considered; paying off a mortgage, resettling somewhere more congenial, gifts to assist children – all touched upon – but at no stage was the actual figure either mentioned or guessed at. I suspect if I had the inclination a route around the internet would answer my prurient curiosity. A very jolly internet game is, having dined with friends, to check on the return journey just what their house is worth and how, given the quality of the wines and likely size of the school fees, they can possibly be managing. Or an alumnus of this college who described another alumnus as 'minted', and when quizzed couldn't put a figure to the adjective; although plainly it was more than the many, many thousands he earned.

Working and living in the City of London I could scarcely duck the theme of 'wealth' in the Dean's quiver of impolite subjects upon which to discourse. In the City wealth is of course a given, although often misunderstood. Many people think that I can assist them to access funds whereas, although there is much charitable focus and some endowment, most City enterprises are engaged in husbanding assets which are emphatically not their own. But people do make prodigious and dynastic sums and although the symbols of excess (champagne, dining, houses, cars, philanthropy) wax and wane we know that the gap between rich and poor is significantly greater here than elsewhere and that in Scandinavian lands where the gap is slighter there is greater social cohesion and reported contentment. And money earned is profoundly associated with self-worth and status. When I was first a parish priest in the City, with others I visited a senior figure in a major investment bank to propose that there should be greater thoughtfulness about the way in which financial products had an adverse impact on some of the poorest communities of the globe. The banker considered this soberly over a generous breakfast and commented that what we were failing to spot, was that most financial activity (trading, invention of new instruments and so on) was akin to the instincts of the games field at school and university rather than the philosopher's chair or the ethicist's pulpit. Wealth making and its rewards are seldom very exalted and the assault on mutuality has reduced its tone. I am not criticising, for this sort of gamesmanship does not appeal to me and I would be no good at it. But we should be unsurprised that the annual round of appraisal and pay negotiation – what is sometimes referred to confusingly as 'compensation' - is rife with status challenges, envy and disappointment; a minefield of character refinement and spiritual peril.

We could wonder where such tendencies have their origin. At one time, perhaps still, the Law was considered a likely source of rewards for the intellectually gifted. In my time as chaplain here, many changed Tripos so that they could fulfil the professional exemptions afforded by Part II. Such was this that one tutor expostulated, 'there seems to be much interest in Law in this college but no obvious sympathy with justice'. Just so! Impertinently I might wonder if institutions such as this, while espousing the widest causes of education are also, and believed to be, routes not to service and culture alone but to acquisition and wealth.

The Christian tradition has always engaged with the perils of wealth and it was a prominent concern of Jesus and the fathers, although the solutions were seldom political or economic. Recent research has indicated that the conditions at the time of Jesus were such that the exactions of the priestly caste on their own behalf and that of the Romans meant that many were being driven into debt, landlessness and indenture – and indeed that this may have been the condition of the family of Jesus. Joseph, if something of a builder or carpenter may have lost the family land. Of course modern conceptions of wealth and its distribution cannot for a moment be overlaid – it would be absurd to look to the details of a Gospel story or a saying to answer our question, 'what is enough?'. It is only further reflection on the character of the Incarnation and what that says about human dignity which raises particular questions from which theology may not be shy. A shorthand of the appearance amongst us of the Godhead in human flesh is that, 'He became poor that we might become rich'.

Of course many in the Christian tradition have seen in this as a call specifically to embrace poverty, in imitation of the dynamic of the Incarnation and in solidarity with the poor of the world. Living unostentatiously and simply is a counsel of spiritual encouragement and it may also comprehend radical generosity, which Rowan Williams abbreviates as, 'How can my money be good news for others'. But philanthropy may not always be detachment which is the wiser counsel.

But whereas wealth is somewhat negatively viewed in the tradition as both promoting barriers between people and idols of distraction from love for God, Jesus does use the more nuanced image of 'treasure' to describe that which has acknowledged worldly worth yet which can point generously to the values of the kingdom; treasure as examiner of the heart. In this context the pearl can be so precious as to be worth everything else a person possesses and so treasured that it must not be cast before swine. The pearl becomes not just a symbol of monetary value but a talisman but which all else is weighed. 'Treasure' is not the product of accumulation but of the heart's imagination and cleaving; it comprehends not just value and luxury but beauty and joy.

When the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris was so severely damaged by fire many people were extravagantly ready to assist with money (begging all sorts of questions about insurance, government indemnity and the like). That Cathedral means so much more than a

building for public worship and the authorities will be faced with a very delicate balance of interest, expectation and the use of money. But the Dean of the Cathedral is reported to have been clear in asking where the real value of Notre Dame lay; the architectural ensemble and its place in the French nation perhaps; or the singular artistic treasures within - the rose window, the bells, the astonishing Organ even; or the relics associated with the Passion of Christ – the Crown of thorns and a relic of the True Cross? All precious beyond imagining and on various levels. But the Dean explained that the real treasure above all was the morsel of bread, consecrated as the Body of Christ which rested in the Tabernacle and which had been rescued by a Parisian fireman.

Christian reflection upon wealth has pressed for reform of the social order by which superfluity is enthroned and poverty goes unchallenged – and rightly so. The rich man with his barns failed not only to reflect upon his own end but also to realise that the needy make better barns for those with spiritual ambition. One of the first and most consistent canons of the church is that there may be no fee for baptism, for admission to the Church; money is never rightly part of spiritual exchange. For in the 'bright ambiguities of heaven' the poor will need to wear as their garment at the banquet the generosity of the rich and the rich will be required to sport the humility of the poor.