

'One World, Week 1'
19 October, 2014
Wheatley URC
Zechariah 7:8-12
Psalm 106:1-3
Matthew 22:15-22
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“Do you not know that God entrusted you with that money (all above what buys necessities for your families) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and, indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind? How can you, how dare you, defraud the Lord, by applying it to any other purpose?” So said John Wesley in one of his challenging and memorable sermons, entitled ‘The Danger of Increasing Riches’. He also famously said, “Earn all you can, give all you can, save all you can.”

How many sermons do we hear today that hazard such challenge? How many modern preachers could deliver such a sermon and survive in the pulpit for long? (How many of us preachers could deliver it without having our congregation rightly ask about the log in our own eye?)

The living standard of most British people has gradually but dramatically improved since Wesley took his message to the masses on horseback, since the time when he embodied his ethic of personal involvement with the poor by distributing the bulk of his own personal resources to them. And, as often happens, the elevation of personal living standards has been accompanied by an inability or profound reluctance to part with the lion's share of it. The more we have, the more we start thinking we *need* in order to be happy, or secure.

But too often, if we examine what's really going on, we discover ourselves feeling possessed by our possessions, enslaved by the countless things we acquired in order to simplify our life. And to make matters worse, our enslavement to so much “stuff” and this lifestyle in general, subtly numbs us to the real vulnerability and desperation felt by the majority of God's children across the world. With the rest of the world immediately surrounding us, we allow ourselves to be persuaded that “they” are not our neighbours, not our responsibility; we choose to believe that there's nothing one individual or one family could do to make a difference, anyhow.

Almost half the world—over three billion people—live on less than £1.55 a day. That's less than what we'd pay for a small coffee in most shops! Half the world's people—and more than one billion have less than half of that. But what can we do?

As we learned in the introduction to the theme, today is the first day of One World Week. This annual event was founded in 1978 by the World Development Movement with the aim of reminding one another that we are intrinsically connected with the whole of this world. The decisions we make about everything from the houses, furniture, and vehicles we buy, to the food we put on our tables, to whether we compost and recycle our waste, to how we share resources with neighbours, to the actions we take (or don't take) for justice's sake . . . all of these have real impact on the world, even if our individual impact

seems imperceptible. We *are* all connected. And although we can't feel it, those on the deprived side of things can.

Today is also the first day of national Good Money Week—formerly known as National Ethical Investment Week. This campaign, now in its seventh year and sponsored by the UK Sustainable Investment & Finance Association, brings together financial advisers, fund managers, charities, faith groups, NGOs and a variety of financial organisations to raise awareness about issues of sustainable finance.

As a church, we're taking advantage of the opportunity presented by these two national initiatives to refocus our attention on what is a core concern of the Christian faith.

It seems so simple. Love God, love others, act justly, care for the world, and life will be very good. So why do so many—Christians and non-Christians alike—find the good life so hard, so evasive?

It's partly because we've succumbed to the seductive lie that "the good life is the goods life." Or that similar suggestion that "to have more is to be more." I suspect that most of us here would quickly reject those notions as having any truth for us . . . so why do we struggle like so many others? Where do we go wrong?

I think it starts with our fundamental understanding of whose stuff it is in the first place. We pay lip service to the notion that we are stewards of all we have, but we forget about it in our day-to-day transactions and decision-making. And the very moment that we leave that fundamental understanding behind—the second we abandon the truth that what we have does not finally *belong* to us, but rather is *entrusted* to us in order to accomplish holy work, is the moment our dissatisfaction begins.

If you pay attention to the Bible's stories, you'll notice that wealth is represented as both a blessing and a snare. It can be a bit confusing, because at times it does seem to suggest that extravagant wealth was or is a sign of divine favour, of God's great pleasure with an individual or community.

However, scorn is inevitably poured upon those who abuse their wealth, who become self-absorbed, and neglect their responsibility to the poor and the vulnerable. Because when this happens, of course, the individual has clearly not managed what's been entrusted to them well at all; they've abandoned a vital relationship with the Creator and Giver, trading it for the lesser but easier practice of adoring and accumulating and clinging to the things themselves.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament, there is a consistent message from prophet after prophet. We heard it in our first reading, from the prophet Zechariah: "Administer true justice, show kindness and compassion to each other, do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the resident alien or the poor, and do not plot evil against one another" (7:9). The mistreatment, abandonment, and exploitation of poor people is mentioned more than almost any other sin in the Bible (apart from worshipping other gods). And what is sin, but that which diverts us from enjoying the fullness of life, that places a barrier between us and the God we so long to in full communion with? Do these

things, not because they diminish your life—but because these are the things that make it truly rich, fully alive.

We chase around and flail about in our lives, trying to figure out what will ultimately make us happy. The Psalmist summarised the answer perfectly: “Happy are they who act justly, who do what is right at all times!” (106:3)

It’s hard to stay mindful of that when so many of the messages we get, hundreds of times a day from birth, suggest that our real preoccupation ought to be with money and stuff; we’re fed lies from the beginning about how our financial net worth says something meaningful about our ultimate net worth.

According to the Gospel writers, Jesus talked a lot about money. But his conversations were all about dismantling these lies about how money gives us ultimate worth. It should tell us something that the Son of God proclaimed that he’d come to bring good news *to the poor*. Did you know that 16 of the 38 parables were concerned with how to handle money and possessions, and 288 verses from the Gospels deal directly with the subject of money?

Today’s lectionary Gospel reading shows the religious leaders trying to trick Jesus into betraying a political bias by asking him a question about money—specifically, about whether they should pay the tax required by the Roman government. It was designed to make Jesus look bad either way: on the one hand, he could look like he supported the Roman oppression (making him unpopular amongst the majority of his Jewish friends and family) by agreeing that Jews should pay the tax to Caesar. Or, he could appear to be a political insurrectionist, encouraging people *not* to pay the tax. Jesus brilliantly reminds his would-be entrappers that the money we have is not our own: it is merely entrusted to us is ours to manage well. So, give to the government what rightly belongs there; and give to God what is God’s.

To this day, Christians will debate over the issue of taxes—whether we are obliged to pay them, whether the government has a right to the money, and whether it’s doing a good job with the money it receives.

And insofar as our debating is concerned with how tax receipts are being managed, as stewards who have been entrusted with a portion of what is received, we do have a right and a responsibility to ask questions and hold our government accountable.

Tax justice has become a major concern in recent years—growing numbers of people are calling for an end to tax avoidance by large corporations and wealthy individuals. As taxpayers, we are stewards with an interest in how our government manages this money. As people of faith who understand that we have a sacred trust to manage all our resources well, it is good to pause and consider whether we are making our voices of concern or disapproval heard when we recognise behaviours by individuals, corporations, or governments that undermine God’s agenda of caring for every soul and every square inch of this creation.

But the debate goes off track anytime we start to think that the money we’re debating about is our own. Our responsibility is not to minimise the tax we pay in order to

maximise the amount we get to keep. Our calling is to make sure that all of the resources—money, energy, time, property, soil, water, air—all are used well in order to further God’s work of nurturing and saving this world.

That involves asking hard questions about where the money entrusted to us is going: first, is it mostly being spent on ourselves, or are we remembering to tend to those who have less each day than what we spend on a small coffee? How attentive are we to those to whom Jesus came to bring good news—to the poor, and those whom society largely rejects?

Next, are we investing what we’ve been entrusted to manage well, in banks and businesses that share our concern for the poor, the vulnerable, and for preserving the earth’s resources?

Almost all of us here have investments in savings or pension plans, insurance, mutual funds and/or stock portfolios. Do we investigate whether the banks and businesses are ethical in the ways they’re managing the money we’ve given them? Are we curious about their worker’s conditions, pay ratios, lending practices and rates of interest—and the ways in which all of these things have real impact on real people, all of whom we’re called to care about in Christ’s name? Do we move the money in our care out of places that don’t treat others or the earth with the sort of concern and compassion that Jesus demonstrated?

The theme of this year’s One World Week is “Living Differently: Breaking Chains—Making Change.” Across this week, I hope that each of us will take some time to reflect on the chains that may bind us: do we feel in any way bound up by the wealth that’s been entrusted to us? And if so, then what will we do about that? I also hope that we’ll give some thought to the chains that bind so many others throughout the world—those we know, and those we’ve never laid eyes on.

Nelson Mandela once said, “. . . to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” Whether the chains that bind are chains of affluence or chains of poverty, we have a message of hope and freedom to bring as disciples of Jesus Christ. How will you and I live differently—how will we break those chains in practical ways, and effect change in Jesus’ name? Amen.