St Martin in the Fields

The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity
4 September 2016

Giving up all our Possessions

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Reading: Luke 14: 25-33

'None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.' Jesus isn't shy about making bold statements. Did you spot any ambiguity there? No, I didn't, either.

What does Jesus ask of us? He calls us to join an accountable community that stays close to him, listens to his voice and seeks to know his ways; to be with the poor, sharing the experience of exclusion, allowing our lives to be changed by encounter with those in whom he promised to show his face; and to engage with those in authority, holding such people to account and looking for their conversion to God's kingdom and its expectations.

Does this require giving up all our possessions? Francis of Assisi certainly thought so. Francis made himself socially vulnerable and divested himself of political and military power. What Francis was doing was taking Jesus' radical summons and turning it into a social vision that at the same time renewed the church. His renunciation of property meant he could never be drawn into the most common form of social conflict – which arises when one person defends their property rights against another's. His poverty has been called 'a form of economic unilateral disarmament.'

St Francis gave up all his possessions and followed Jesus. Simple as that. And within the conscience of many of us here today, I suspect, is a nagging suspicion that perhaps we should be doing the same. But the Francis model isn't the only one that's had a hold on the church's imagination when it comes to money. Equally influential are the words from Acts 2: 'All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.'

This image has a powerful hold on the imagination of many Christians. There's a perpetual sense that, if we were doing it properly, we'd be sharing washing machines and having childcare cooperatives and sitting down for constant community meals. But it's important to note that this is a different picture from Jesus' words to the crowds about taking up the cross and renouncing all possessions. The Luke 14 model is about living vulnerably before God and simply following Jesus. The Acts 2 model is about making a collective commitment and finding the activity of the Holy Spirit in the worship and practices of a community. Both models are compelling, but they're not the same.

The two dominant kinds of medieval monasticism – the mendicant friars and the wealthy monasteries – represented these two poles of engaging with the ideal of somehow getting money right. But both models turned out to be flawed when translated to the vision for a whole society. The friars created anarchy, while the monasteries generated corruption, wealth, and hypocrisy. Nonetheless many Christians feel, deep down, we ought to given up everything and followed Jesus, living a simple life of prayer and service and relying on alms. Meanwhile many Christian communities aspire to a noble ideal of shared possessions or at least in part a common purse.

For the most part the church has found these two models too challenging to be implemented and too disruptive to be sustainable. Two other venerable models emerged that broadly encompass the church's consensus about money. The first and earliest is the benefactor model. The logic of the benefactor model goes like this. 'I am not willing or able to make the kind of commitment of the monk or the mendicant. But I want the church to flourish, I want to be close to God, and I want myself and my loved ones to go to heaven. So I will subcontract the achievement of these goals to those who have made such all-encompassing commitments, and I will finance their flourishing.'

The other model that's shaped the imagination of the church, precisely because it doesn't demand wholehearted sacrificial commitment, is the stewardship model. The key figure here is John Wesley. Wesley's famous slogan was 'Gain all you can; save all you can; give all you can.' Wesley teaches us to consider ourselves simply the first among the poor we must care for. But notice this rules out voluntary or communal poverty altogether. If we have no money, we can't care for the poor, as a certain Margaret Thatcher once famously pointed out.

It may be that these two models have run their course. The Church of England was largely established, and for many centuries run, on the benefactor model. Some decades ago the sums ceased to add up. It's important to note that this isn't primarily about real or perceived falls in congregation size, because under the benefactor model congregation size isn't an especially important factor in how money works in the church. It's about sociological changes, like how long retired clergy live, what constitutes reasonable provision for people in their retirement, whether the noblesse feel as obliged as they used to, given that the ancient aristocracy are not so fixed in their estates as they once were, and the shift of the majority of the population to cities, where relationships of unspoken obligation are different from the abiding practice of the country.

And so what's happened in the last two or three generations is that a church whose money rested fundamentally on the system and legacy of squirearchy has morphed into a church that rests on congregationalism. By congregationalism I mean the assumption that the basic unit of Christianity is the local church, that each local church should seek to be self-sufficient as regards the provision of its ministry, building and administrative costs, and that those costs should be met almost entirely through the voluntary stewardship of members of its congregation.

Congregationalism is a long way from the Acts 2 model of holding all things in common. But at its best it affirms all the things we say each year on Giving Sunday: that money is always God's, not ours, that the more one gives, the more one cares, and that giving makes the relationships of community essential. And deeper than that, congregational stewardship discloses that money is always a gift, always an instrument, to serve a greater end – and never a goal, never an end in itself. Money becomes a means of establishing and maintaining relationships, rather than a method of bypassing relationships, or an insurance in case relationships go wrong.

The negative features of congregational stewardship come down to three. One is the tendency to shrink the mission of the church to the priorities of those with the largest wallets. Another is that the more self-sufficient a congregation becomes the more irrelevant the diocese seems to be, and the sense of the church as a community of diversity and interdependence is consequently diminished. Number three is the conviction that stewardship is fundamentally about money. Money is never more than a device for creating relationships, and once one has those relationships, the money is secondary. It's vital to remember that God's abundance is located in the relationships, not in the money.

What's happened in the Church of England is that we've shifted somewhat abruptly from a benefactor model that affirmed hierarchies, perhaps enshrined mixed motives, was hopelessly tied to an outdated class and patronage system, and yet directed the church's attention to the whole parish, the whole nation, and the wider goods of the kingdom, to a stewardship model that can galvanise a congregation, but tends to narrow the notion of mission, impoverish the texture of a diocese, and overvalue the power of money compared to relationship. And the new model doesn't pay the bills. But I don't believe this should be a cause for unbounded lament because I'm not sure it was a truly scriptural model in the first place.

What does this mean for us as a church? Well, there's still a vital place for benefaction and stewardship. Here at St Martin's they brought us our Renewal Project and they finance the Christmas Appeal and the Connection and they pay for the clergy and our worshipping and congregational life. St Martin's worked on the benefactor model right up until the 1980s, when suddenly we realised the sums didn't add up. The costs of the building and social outreach far exceeded the potential of congregational stewardship. The answer was to create a commercial enterprise. The results 30 years later have meant that we've been able to maintain and expand our mission well beyond the imaginations of our most generous donors.

But there's more to it than that. Originally the food services, retail, events and commercial concerts were seen largely as a worldly cash cow to underwrite the lofty spiritual mission and ministry of the church. But what's happened is that the business has ended up teaching all of us a lot about the kingdom. Our 135 staff hail from more than 25 countries; the company is a microcosm of the multicultural society London is striving for. We now aspire to offer a vision of a civil economy, of what work and play, friendship and worship, social concern and evangelism, diversity and identity might look like.

Seventy years ago a welfare revolution took place in this country in which the state became the church. The state took over a lot of the things the church used to do. The church had a choice: it had to decide what it was going to be. It more or less said to the state, you look after the body and we'll look after the soul. Right now the state is having second thoughts and isn't at all sure it wants to be the church anymore. It's a really exciting time to be the church. But in order to enjoy our possibilities we have to believe the church is about more than the soul; and we have to let our financial needs and the material poverty of many we encounter become entry-points to new adventures, new relationships, and new discoveries in God's kingdom.

In today's gospel Jesus challenges us to choose whether we're going to put our money to use to serve him or put him to use to serve our money. What we've seen is that the Luke 14 model of giving all our possessions away and the Acts 2 model of having all things in common are demanding because they dismantle familial and economic expectations that the church over the centuries has felt it couldn't live without. In place of them the church pursued two other models, that of benefactor and steward. These are the models that are coming to grief today. We talk as if they were the only models. But they're both profoundly flawed, and neither does full justice to the way Jesus talks about money as the stimulus to the renewal of relationships, rather than a mechanism for navigating the shortcomings of relationships.

Our choice is whether to let Jesus' words about money sit uncomfortably in our stomach like something we wish we hadn't eaten, or whether to take them as a challenge to make money stimulate new relationships in God's kingdom. Jesus isn't a financial adviser suggesting prudent ways to hide your money so God won't find it – he's a kingdom entrepreneur asking us to invest everything we have in the God who's invested everything in us. The real question is, are we prepared to invest the way God invests? Or do we think we know better?