

## **SERMON FOR TRINITY 14 | 22.09.2019**

Amos 8: 4-7; I Timothy 2: 1-7; St Luke 16: 1-10

***So what do you talk about in sermons on Sunday mornings? someone asked me recently? I think the implication was that most clergy stick to safe subjects and ones that relate to their own fairly limited life experiences. Preach faith until you have it, said John Wesley – but there are many ways of doing that and it seems to me that part of this job is to at least touch (as best I can) on the life experiences of the whole congregation, not just mine.***

**Faced with this Gospel, I knew at once that I was wading into areas well outside my comfort zone. The whole area of banking and finance – which is the bread and butter of many connected with St James' – is very much a bubble of its own and I don't even have the vocabulary to start a conversation about what happens in those great monolithic buildings that fill the Square Mile and Canary Wharf.**

**But of course what goes in those places affects us all deeply - as a bit of research revealed. Take for example the widely held assumption that our children will go on to be better paid than us their parents.**

**I had blithely assumed that the income of my two daughters would far outstrip my income – and indeed, post war, that was always the case. But growth rates currently have resulted in something that we are just waking up to: that the opportunities for at least a third of our children are going to leave them rather worse off, especially if they are not graduates. Even more alarming is the gap between the high flyers and the rest which is widening, year on year – the product of what is called 'rentier capitalism' where income does not come from an increase in productivity but in a few being able to sell their trading and management skills at the expense of those doing the work at the bottom of the pile. One fact: the salary of UK CEOs against those at the bottom was marked at 48:1 in 1998 but rose to 129:1 in 2016. In the US the ratio was 42:1 in 1998; in 2016 it was 347:1.**

**Then I open the Financial Times and read that many European traders actually wants the UK out of the EU: why. Competition? No. Because of our corruption!**

**According to the FT, a 40-something trader called Martin Shields and a group of seasoned tax lawyers and mathematical whizz kids had managed to siphon off EU60bn from the tax man through what has become known as the ‘cum-ex’ scandal.**

**At his trial in Bonn Shields, working for Merrill Lynch, had openly admitted: *Our tool was tax optimization: avoiding taxation as far as possible and taking advantage of any opportunities that could be found or created. This was not a clandestine approach of a few. Rather it was the clear and openly communicated expectation of most major banks and customers.***

**Asked in court whether he thought what he had been doing was wrong he said, *I often ask myself whether, if I had had my time again I would do things differently. Knowing what I know now, the answer is obvious. I would not have involved myself in the cum-ex industry.***

**But what intrigued me was his motivation. Under questioning he said that he had found his work on the trading floor both thrilling and exhilarating. He had read engineering at Oxford. Of that cohort of 120, only 5 had actually gone into engineering. He now had a personal fortune of about £12m. So was he genuine when he said that, *knowing what I know now, the answer is obvious. I would not have involved myself in the cum-ex industry?* Was he only saying that because he had been caught?**

**Jesus’ Gospel story doesn’t take us into offshore investment companies it takes us to the relationship between a farmer and his manager. And the circumstances are a bit different too: this manager is not just corrupt he is losing money. Like our pin striped Martin Shields, he too is being held to account before his peers.**

**But even in his current predicament he has the future in mind. *When I get slung out on my ear, who is going to look after me then?* So he buys the complicity of those who owe money to the farmer, getting them to mark down the debts they owed: 50% off here, 20% off there. Both manager and tenant would do well when the day of reckoning finally came.**

**So why doesn't verse 8 end with something like: *when the farmer heard what his manager had done, he threw him out into the street with nothing?* Why does the manager – and by association Jesus – seem to applaud the sharp practice of the manager?**

**Well, of course, they aren't really on the side of the bent manager at all. But what they are doing is to recognise his skill at making some kind of provision for the future in the face of complete ruin. Call it bald faced cheek or financial wizardry, what these corrupt people show us – and this includes Martin Shields – is that an ability to exploit and manipulate the system to their advantage was all very possible. What they didn't have were the scruples to stop them diverting tax funds from schools, hospitals and the social care of the elderly. And to our shame (if it is true) the EU financiers were suggesting that these kinds of tax dodges are more prevalent in London than elsewhere. So the headlines: *£60bn: the robbery of the century*. So, yes to Brexit, they say, and yes to a cleaner financial system in Europe...**

**So why the parable? Is Jesus knocking the way we work – with the inevitable discrepancy between rich and poor that I spoke about earlier? I am not so sure he is – although the pay gap personally makes me feel sick. But in St Luke's Gospel this story follows on directly from the story of the Prodigal Son, the one who went off with half his dad's fortune and squandered it. And the pairing isn't coincidental.**

**Surely what Jesus is trying to say to us is: *we know there are bad people out there, the people of darkness, who will try to screw you for everything you have. But you who are people of the light, the people in whom the Holy Spirit has been poured, the ones who have the integrity and the moral values of the Kingdom of God: for goodness sake stop sitting on your hands!***

**These financial skills are not reserved for the go-getters out to make a quick buck for themselves: they are the rules of the game which anyone with brains and drive can use. So, when are you going to do something with the resources you have at your disposal?**

**Or in our Church bubble: why is it that we are can so easily seem so wet about finance – or even dismissive of what it can do.**

**OK so this isn't my skill set, but there are plenty of people in our churches with good financial brains. Why aren't their issues talked about in sermons? Why aren't we regularly thinking about investment in ethical industries, withdrawing from those involved in armaments, deforestation, tobacco (and vaping!) for example.**

**Well, at last, and not before time, we are: on Wednesday night Susan and Alastair our Treasurers, together with a number of the parish with skills in this area, are meeting together as part of our Financial Review Group (the FRG). Through luck and good judgement, the parish has considerable historic assets and they sit in the bank year on year.**

**Of course they are not quite on the same scale they once were because we have raided the pot over the last eight years to enable us to completely renew our buildings so that they can be used for our primary purpose of preaching the Gospel and bringing people to faith. That has been our agreed priority and I hope none of us resents the money that has been spent.**

**But what of the rest? And this is where Jesus' parable offers us a substantial challenge: in what way are we, the children of light, going to use those resources to make the world a better place?**

**Have we the courage and the nous to move those funds where they will make most difference? Will we only take the safest option or will we be eager to find those ethical trusts that truly mirror our priorities?**

**And will we put 100% effort into reading up the options and into digging into our spiritual treasury to make sure that God's priorities – the care for the poor and the marginalized – are not squeezed out by our desire to keep the best for ourselves?**

**It wasn't the dishonesty of the manager that Jesus was commending; it was his astuteness and his drive. So today we will be praying in our intercessions for all those whose lives are spent in those big, faceless buildings with famous (or not so famous) names. And we will be praying that as they handle our capital, they will ensure that their Christianity doesn't just sit on the sidelines for Sundays but will truly inform every decision they make. And we will pray that we, as a parish, learn to do the same.**