

St George's Windsor
Trinity 17: September 18 2016

You cannot serve God and wealth. These are the last words that we heard from today's reading from St Luke's Gospel. **You cannot serve God and wealth.** So it probably will not surprise you that, this morning, I intend to say a little bit about 'money'.

If you look for it, you can find quite a lot about money, and our attitude to it, in the New Testament. But it is possibly in St Luke's Gospel that the subject is raised most frequently. For St Luke, money is clearly a problem; a 'spiritual' problem that is. Sometimes, he seems to advise us about the best way in which to 'use' our money. Sometimes, he seems to be telling us to get rid of it altogether. There is some perplexity here but, at the very least, he draws to our attention the fact that 'worldly wealth' can be an impediment to our living life in all its fullness, and to our entering what, in the teaching of Jesus, is known as 'The Kingdom of God'. But let me put St Luke and his Gospel aside for a while, and get stuck into something else.

Those of you who hear me preach from time to time will know that I have a tendency to latch on to a poem or a poet. One of the reasons for my doing so is that I believe that the 'recognized' poet in any generation is usually 'recognised' because he or she gives voice to some real concern of 'the time'; a concern that is, as often as not, to do with something religious, spiritual or moral.

One such poet, whom I have often turned to in this Chapel, is the poet Philip Larkin. This agnostic was perhaps the most 'recognised' poet of the second half of the twentieth century; recognised, so I believe, because he gave voice to some of the profoundest concerns that 'haunted' the minds and hearts of people of that time – which is of course, since it is so recent, 'our' time too.

In 1973, Philip Larkin wrote a poem called '**Money**'. Larkin was, by all accounts, somewhat parsimonious and, when he got to the stage in his career when he began to earn some real money, he tended to keep it in the bank. About this, he felt mildly uneasy. The first verse of his poem expresses that unease.

Quarterly, is it, money reproaches me:
'Why do you let me lie here wastefully?
I am all you never had of goods and sex.
You could get them still by writing a few cheques.'

So this man who 'plays safe' with his money looks around him at those of a more 'spendthrift' temperament.

So I look at others, what they do with theirs:
They certainly don't keep it upstairs.
By now they've a second house and car and wife:
Clearly money has something to do with life

And so Larkin ponders the connection of money and life, and comes to the conclusion that:

-In fact, they've a lot in common, if you enquire:
You can't put off being young until you retire,
And however you bank your screw, the money you save
Won't in the end buy you more than a shave.

The 'shave' that he speaks of is, of course, the 'shave' that the male corpse might receive in the funeral parlour before being laid in the coffin. That, in the end, is what your entire savings (or spending) amount to.

And all this saving or spending doesn't seem to do very much to cure the ills and inequalities of the world in which we live. Larkin reflects:

I listen to money singing. It's like looking down
From long french windows at a provincial town,
The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad
In the evening sun. It is intensely sad.

Money sings like a siren, luring him to a world that is 'provincial', slum-infested and 'mad'. Larkin concludes that 'It is intensely sad'.

Larkin must have been aware that he spoke not only for the twentieth century, but for the early nineteenth century too. In his sonnet **The World Is Too Much with Us**, Wordsworth had complained: 'Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.'

The point that I am trying to make is that a real anxiety about money, and its grip upon us, is not to be limited (to return to him once more) to the likes of St Luke. Time and again, that anxiety rises to the surface. And it surfaces, so I believe, because we all know, somewhere deep within us, that human beings do not 'live by bread alone'; because, somewhere deep within us, we harbour a belief that we should lay up for ourselves treasure in heaven, rather than upon earth.

In our own time, the problem, the dilemma, has become acute. For most people today, it is taken as an axiom, as a self-evident truth, that the making of money and that the accruing of wealth is the whole 'point' of each and every one of our

serious endeavours. And yet, buried inside us, is a kind of wisdom; the knowledge that: You **cannot serve God and wealth**. We carry within us a sort of ‘dis-ease’; a sense of being trapped, like poor old Midas, in a materialistic world. Larkin, for all his down-to-earth-ness and his common-sense worldliness, had a sense of that imprisonment. He had some understanding of our sad condition; of the conflict that we feel.

A significant part of the problem today is that we have carelessly allowed ourselves to become part of a culture within which the only commonly-shared means by which we express the value or worth of an activity or person is money. Money (what we can earn and what we can charge) is the measure of the worthwhileness of our contribution to society, and hence the measure of our own self-worth. What we fail to understand is that this way of looking at life is bound to lead to chronic dissatisfaction for, since some others will always be better placed than we are, we shall always have a sense of being under-valued or even valueless. I suppose that is why the sin of envy sometimes seems ubiquitous.

I said that we have carelessly allowed ourselves to become part of this culture. We Christians have come to talk the same ‘money’ language as most of our fellow citizens. But we have another language. It is a language that enables us to speak of our value, our worth, as deriving solely from the fact that we are loved by God. It is a liberating language. It frees us from the anxious and competitive vicious circle of making more and more and yet of feeling ourselves to be less and less. It engenders gratitude within the heart, and gratitude is bound to bloom in generosity and contentment.

Where that will lead any one of us of course I do not know. But I am sure that it will release us from the imprisonment that I have spoken of. And that’s a start!

The Right Reverend David Conner, KCVO
Dean of Windsor