

Serving God Through Mammon (Pentecost 16, Sept 18th, St Mungo's)

We are passing through times of heightened but mixed emotions. In this season of creationtide, we are reminded of the intricate beauty of the world around us but alarmed by reports of the harm we are inflicting our planet, almost daily. We don't know whether to shout for joy or cry. On the death of Queen Elizabeth II, those lining the streets to see her coffin pass or queuing to pass by it also have mixed emotions. There is gratitude for the fine record of her deeds but sadness at the loss of someone –the like of whom they will never see again. They- too- don't know whether to shout for joy or cry and most do both. I decided to start our service on a positive note by singing a hymn which opens with the words 'Shout for joy'!

Today's gospel (Luke 16 v 1-13) begins with Jesus telling a story or parable, something he often did as a way of guiding his listeners on how they should live their lives. All his stories merit careful thought but that's particularly true of today's parable, entitled 'The Shrewd Steward' in NIV. The problem is that all the characters in the parable are flawed. There are no heroes; no 'goodies'; nobody to use as a role model. Most puzzling of all, the dishonest manager at the heart of the story gets praised by his master. The master is a wealthy man, with business assets in many places; he returns to one in particular to check out reports that the man he left in charge of his local business has been cheating on him, lining his own pockets at the owner's expense.

The master is not very smart because he allows his manager to continue cheating him. Without asking permission, the manager gives all those who are in his master's debt hefty discounts, hoping to get into their good books. He's banking on one offering him a job to replace the post he was about to be sacked from. Despite being in the managerial class, he was vulnerable and needed a job to keep poverty away from his family's door.

The sting in this tale comes when the dishonest steward is commended by his master for smart thinking. The master may have cheated his way to become so wealthy and there is honour among thieves! He may have done the same thing had he thought about it and had a secret admiration for his manager's smartness. So, it was empty praise and came from an equally flawed character.

The parable is a perfect paradigm for Creationtide and our mixed feelings about events in the world around us. Wherever we stand in the world's rich list, we do not care as well or as much as we could for the planet, which has been placed in our care. Our planet's wealth is not fair game to be gobbled up by the few at the expense of the many: it's our business to look after it and share its wealth equitably.

Jesus' assertion that 'You cannot serve God and Money' (NIV) is as true today as the day he made it. New translations take the edge off the pronouncement as it had appeared previously: KJV & RSV refer to serving God and Mammon, from a Greek word that could mean all material wealth and even the personification of wealth in a false idol. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with wealth: the creator has provided untold wealth, sufficient for everyone to live comfortably, free from hunger and poverty. Problems arise when some pursue and accrue more than their fair share of wealth because that inevitably cheats others. Such dishonest behavior is not worthy of 'children of the light', i.e. those who are and what we can be.

Our 21st C society remains geared to the service of two masters. Those with the most power and influence are generally intent on converting the wealth of creation, the planet's natural resources, into cash for themselves. They are like the master in Jesus' story. It is hard for us managers to change gear but we all need to engage reverse to stop heating up our planet with rabid consumption.

Our difficulties may be eased by making two changes in the way we live.

1. If we can see and find God, where and as what He must be- the lifeblood of all that is- spirit of creation and heart of mammon, we can achieve focus. By locating God in everything that surrounds us, valuing everything as gifts to be cared and shared fairly with others, we serve only one master.

2. If we can share that focus with others, we will make faster progress. Such an approach chimes with Matt 9 where Jesus says, 'use your worldly wealth to gain friends'. He continues 'so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings'. 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'.

At this point, Debbie McHaffie shared with us the substantial changes her family had made to consume less energy and reduce their carbon footprint, including car-sharing to get to work and replacing their old boiler with a heat pump. Nick had invited such examples, however small, so I mentioned the landing light, which had stayed on unnecessarily every night and year of my married life, consuming 180kW p.a. until we switched to LED bulbs.

The outpouring of respect and gratitude for our late queen may be partly down to respect for the balance she struck between serving God and mammon. For 70 years, she operated as nominal head of state and church, blessed with far more than her fair share of wealth, bequeathed and not earned. She had little or no power to alter that structure and probably pondered on many occasions whether or not she was serving mammon rather than God. Within the constraints of a constitutional monarchy, she exercised her responsibilities with honesty, did what she could for others and encouraged others to do the same. She served God through mammon in that sense: let us aspire to do the same.

Neville