

ON MONEY

I

I have sometimes heard church people deplore the fact that so much of our time and trouble is taken up with money. At the last Synod of this diocese, for example, every decision of importance was related in some way to the supply of funds. But many of the delegates spoke and acted as though they thought this were a bad thing; and that somehow the real business of Synod ought not to be mixed up with such sordid matters. The same is true in parishes. How often people complain that all we ever seem to talk about at congregational or vestry meetings is money! The feeling is widespread that money is somehow unworthy of christians; and that the Church is wrong to give it so much place.

And yet we all know quite well that money is the most important single factor in our lives. Other things, to be sure, may occasionally take precedence. Our sexual instincts are powerful, and can drive out for a time all other awareness. And there are some for whom intellectual, or artistic, or political activity can be absorbing and compelling. But all these things depend, for their proper expression, upon a civilized ordering of the material conditions of human existence.

If we are to make love, for example, as rational beings — rather than merely to copulate as animals — then we need warm houses and comfortable beds. Debates on ‘national unity’ and ‘bi-lingualism’, unless there be full employment and growing prosperity, are sterile and ritualistic. Inquiries into the nature of Belief or the function of the Mind require a vast and costly apparatus of libraries and laboratories, computers and learned professors.*

All of this takes money, as we say. For money is the instrument by which we control the materials of this life so as to make them serve the priorities we elect.

II

But if money is so important, why are we ashamed of it? Whether christian or non-christian, almost all of us at some time or the other feel that men and women ought to be free to make decisions without having to look at their bank statements. Political visionaries imagine Utopian societies in which money is abolished; and in which goods and services are distributed ‘From each according to his ability: to each according to his need’. Are these genuine intimations of a better world; or is it all an illusion fostered by centuries of admiration for the well-to-do? Are we condemned to exist for ever under the

* This sermon was part of a series of sermons on current topics: ‘sex’, ‘bi-lingualism’, ‘money’, ‘believe’, ‘mind’. The composition of the series was determined by the availability of speakers.

discipline of money; or can we hope to break out into a new and higher form of life, in which all can live with the free abandon of an Eighteenth Century aristocrat?

All purely worldly answers are either too optimistic or too pessimistic. Only the christian faith does full justice to all the realities. Political and social reformers, who suppose that we can change human nature by Act of Parliament, ignore the fact that on this Earth no good thing can ever be had without giving up some other good thing to obtain it. Everything has a cost — if not to ourselves, then to some other or to society as a whole. Economists and businessmen are acutely aware of this, and pour scorn on the ‘impractical’ schemes of the idealists. But economists are often tempted to fall into the opposite error: to think of human beings as so many rather poorly made calculating machines; and to assume that social questions can always be translated into the problem of how to maximize the quantity and the rate of growth of goods and services.

Christian theology recognises the limitations upon human life in this world. Christians, if they think clearly, will never be carried away by any great enthusiasm for vast programs of social and economic change. Such things may sometimes be good, and we may recognise and assist them. But we shall not put all our faith in them. Our understanding of the human condition begins with the doctrine of the Fall of Man.

The myth of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden remains the best account of what this life is really about. In a sense, the idealists and the optimists are right; and so are all of us who have ever looked beyond the physical possibilities of this world to some elusive paradise beyond. Man is made ‘in the image and likeness of God’. (Gen 1:26) We were not meant to live in poverty and darkness, to suffer injuries and sickness, and to die. But yet we do. And so, in another sense, the economists and pessimists are right. ‘In the sweat of thy race shalt thou eat bread, till thou return into the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.’ (Gen 3:19)

We have been relegated from our proper, god-like status. We live as creatures in a universe governed by the laws of Nature. Matter and Energy cannot be created or destroyed, but only transformed: we cannot get something for nothing. The science of Economics, which considers how to get as much as possible for as little as possible, is a logical consequence of the Fall of Man. The social contrivance of money is a mark of Original Sin.

III

As soon as we recognise this, a lot of otherwise puzzling doctrine becomes much clearer. In the Advent Gospel that we read today, for example, ‘Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the Temple: and overthrew the tables of the money changers.’ (Matt 21:12) Is there anything wrong, in itself, with buying and selling? Are all shop-keepers and businessmen and diocesan administrators to be overthrown and cast out when Christ comes again in glory to judge both the quick and the dead? Not at all: or, at any rate, not necessarily. What was wrong in Jerusalem was the way in which the secular and profane was being admitted to equality with, or even pre-eminence over, the sacred and the holy. The market place is a symbol of our fallen

condition. The Temple is an image of our hope of eternity. When people act as to imply that the material and economic concerns of this life are of ultimate importance, they betray their own humanity and lapse into a brutish acquiescence in the limitations of mortality.

For reasons of this kind we are warned by St Paul in a famous passage that ‘The love of money is the root of all evil’. (I Tim 6:10) Money is nothing more than the sum of everything we can buy with it. A craving after money for its own sake is the most pernicious of all delusions; ignoring the substance to strain after the shadow – a desire for emptiness scarcely differing from the death-wish itself. But even if money be sought and coveted for economic purposes, this too is an evil. The utmost control over this world’s goods can only very briefly postpone the moment of truth. ‘Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall these things be, which thou hast provided?’ (Luke 12:20)

It is worth risking platitude to say once again that money, like every gift of God it represents, is a good servant but a bad master. We cannot worship both God and Mammon. A person who puts all his trust in his bank balance, or in social and military arrangements which protect it from others like himself, declares that the Fall of Man is irreversible. This short life is all. Visions of a nobler and a better existence are dangerous nonsense – unless, of course, they serve to keep the lower orders obediently waiting for ‘pie in the sky’. But if economic progress be the highest good, then God is nothing, and Jesus died in vain.

IV

Money is a bad master: a jealous god whose cultus is the purest form of nihilism. And this, of course, is why good church people are often so uneasy in its presence. But can it be our servant? Can we use and enjoy it to the glory of God and the benefit of our fellow men? Can we talk about money, at our Synods and our parish meetings, without ceasing thereby to talk about Christ and his kingdom?

If the Gospel be true, then the answer is Yes. If Christ rose from the dead; if we can take this as a sign of new creation – a ‘Second Adam’ truly human, the ‘image and likeness of God’; if we can share in that life through our faith, in Baptism; if we too can be once more the heirs of eternal life: if all this we can believe, then the entire character of the few short decades we spend on Earth is profoundly changed.

Original Sin is abolished. The Fall of Man is reversed. The physical universe is no longer our prison, but now a kindergarten of Heaven. The laws of Nature are a special case of the Eternal Law of God. Material elements are the plasticine and Meccano sets by which we learn to think of larger things. By means of Bread and Wine we come to know Eternity. In the faces of our fellow men we see the image of our Creator.

All the things that money buys are placed within our reach by God. The laws of Economics remain true, but serve now as a discipline of the nursery. Money is no longer a mark of servitude, but a means of grace: a sacrament of our inheritance and an instrument of God’s purpose in this life.

It is ours to use or to misuse. For thirty pieces of silver we can destroy the Lord of all Creation; and buy for ourselves an endless night of emptiness and blackness. With the widow's mite we can commit the whole of our lives to the service of Goodness and Truth. And with gold of the Orient, if we are so endowed, we can join with the wisest and greatest of our fellow creatures in honour to the Son of Man; by whose miraculous birth, holy life and triumphant death we may become the Sons of God.