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First Reading: Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7 sit

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’ 1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden”?’ 2 The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.”’ 4 But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Second Reading: “Investing in the Kingdom”, Samuel Wells

‘Why should I spend my money on the church?’ Such a question is based on a misunderstanding. The first mistake is to speak of ‘my’ money. Property rights are a convention of civilized society – but they’re fundamentally based on a falsehood. Things don’t belong to us. They belong to God. Like everything else, money is something we look after for a while, but can’t ultimately keep. The choice is not whether to hang on to it or give it away, it’s who to give it to.

Secondly, if we replace ‘spend’ with ‘invest’, then we broaden our imaginations to consider what really lasts for ever. And that again leads us to God, for God is ‘that which lasts for ever’. (…) If we’re in the investment business, which we all are, why wouldn’t we invest in that which lasts for ever? It makes all other investment look absurdly short-term.

God has given us everything we need. We can spend our money either out of gratitude or in constructing an impregnable empire that doesn’t need God. If we invest out of gratitude that’s not about ‘should’ – about duty, about obligation. That’s about overflow, about joy, about celebrating amazing grace. The law of exchange, where one person has goods and services and another person buys them, only works for transitory things. When we’re dealing with ‘for ever’ we need to revert to another system. And the name of that system is ‘gift’. The more you transfer resources from the market economy into the gift economy, the more you’re starting to enter eternal life.

For Christians, whose whole lives are oriented to the economy of gift and investing in for ever, and the word for the place where gift and for ever meet is church. There’s nothing more inspiring than being among a bunch of people who have committed to living in the economy of grace and invested in church and are resting on the providence of God. God isn’t a distant and arbitrary landlord who is twice a year summoned to fix the plumbing. God is the one who’s invested everything in the church and who invites the church to invest everything in return.

God gives us the abundance of the kingdom to renew the poverty of the church. In other words, if the church is in a cul-de-sac or a quagmire, it’s time to invest in the kingdom.

THE GOSPEL Matthew 4.1-11

1 Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ 4 But he answered, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’ 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 6 ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you,” and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’ 7 Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’ 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; 9 and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ 10 Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’ 11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

SERMON: Matthew 4.1-11, Lent 1

Rev’d Dr Ivan Khovacs

St James’s Piccadilly

The Grosvenor Chapel

1 March 2020

All of us have learned to read in our Gospel passage three temptations Jesus faces in the desert. But I would like tell you that Jesus faces not three but four temptations, four temptations he struggles against and resits in the desert.

Would you pray with me please: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer” (Psalm 19). Amen.

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There is a quote making the rounds on Internet, wrongly attributed to Albert Einstein, an aphorism I think may well describe the problem Sam Wells wants us to see in his chapter on “Minding God’s Business.” It goes like this: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results.”

Sam’s message in his chapter is that churches in the 21st century cannot simply continue business as usual, doing the same thing over and over again and expect different results in church growth, and in the transforming influence we want to continue having in our communities. Everyone knows that Sunday attendance in churches is on a steady decline, and that churches of all traditions face the threat of becoming irrelevant in contemporary multi-faith, multi-cultural, supposedly post-Christian Britain. Finances, of course, are what they are. And we recognise that any kind of future for the church depends on whether we are able re-invent the business and money end of the church.

Sam help us to see four attitudes towards money and model of how the church has dealt with funding the business of the church from its earliest times.

1. Sell everything you have and give it to the poor. We think of St Francis of Assisi as someone who gives up all his wealth and choose a life of intentional poverty. We think of the rich young ruler Jesus spoke to in no uncertain terms: one thing you lack—sell everything you have and give it to the poor (Matt 10.21).
2. Share everything you have. And here we think specially of the early church in the Book of Acts: “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had” (Acts 4.32). “The tangible results are good will among the people and a growth in the size of the community.” The result is ‘A future that’s bigger than the past’.
3. Fund as much as you can. This is the benefactor model. As Sam Wells points out, however, this model relies on class hierarchy: rich Christians funding the activity of a church serving those in poverty without questioning the structures of poverty in the first instance. “[The benefactor model] rests on a social system dominated by class, patronage, and relationships of unspoken obligations” (SW).
4. From what you have, give as much as you can. This is the stewardship model: God blesses us that we may bless others. So we feel called to give, but inevitably this means giving only out of the disposable income we have.

All four models have their place, but in book ‘A Future That’s Bigger than the Past’, Sam says these models have had their time. And he would like us to see them replaced by an ‘economy of gift’ in which the church becomes generative and enterprising.

There are two problems with these models, and so two reasons for a complete rethink in the way we in the churches deal with the business of money:

1. All of four models trade on the idea that church is a specialised activity (worship and charity) separate from the ordinary activity of ordinary life. They see no connection between Sunday morning and the Monday morning commute to work.
2. None of these models question the economic structures in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Think of that verse we mercifully no longer sing in our church from the hymn ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’:

The rich man in his castle,

The poor man at his gate,

God made them, high or lowly,

And ordered their estate.

I don’t believe the hymn writer’s comment on the providence of God was intended as approval of the social inequalities of the day; it meant to say that, rich or poor, whatever our station in life, ALL are equally included in God’s redemptive grace. But it is difficult for us to hear that verse today as anything other than a comment on privilege. And it simply makes the point that we need to rethink money and to challenge inequalities in our day.

To do that, we need to think about, as I promised at the beginning, the fourth temptation of Christ in the desert.

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Jesus is of course is tempted with food when he is fasting in the desert, and he is tempted with power, and with the idea of going at it alone, apart from God the Father. Those are the three temptations in the desert. But as Jesus resists the devil, and in doing so, he refuses to separate the spiritual from the physical, the eternal from the temporal, his hunger for food from his hunger for justice.

Satan’s temptations are about separating bread from the bread of life, human from divine, heaven from earth. And what does Jesus say in response that temptation?

What are you talking about? It all goes together! One does not live by bread *alone* but always also by every word that comes from the mouth of God. What are you talking about? I’m not putting God to the test because I trust God with my body, with my very life! And so finally Jesus simply says to the tempter: What are you talking about? Go away! Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him. I am getting on exactly with doing that—I’m going about my Father’s business with every inch of my life.

And we see in the Gospel how the practical and the spiritual are written into the conclusion to the temptations in the desert:

“And suddenly angels came and waited on him!”

But the actual conclusion is easy to miss. Matthew’s Gospel text gave it us at the beginning:

“He fasted for forty days and forty nights, *and afterwards he was famished*.”

For Jesus in the desert, “give us today our daily bread” is both a spiritual reality and a physical reality; both go hand in hand, and for Jesus there is no temptation to separate one from the other.

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When we think of Jesus challenging economic structures of his day, we always think of Jesus overturning the tables in the temple (Matthew 21.12-13; Mark 11.15-18). But what does the Lord’s prayer have to teach us about challenging poverty the social and political structures behind poverty?

What if the prayer Jesus gave his disciples was not simply a prayer for the soul but a prayer for the poor?

Our Father, who art in heaven,

hallowed by thy name,

thy kingdom come, thy will be done

on earth as it is in heaven …

Give us today our daily bread. …

Here is the clue: the flow of prayer grounds to a halt when we say “Give us TODAY our DAILY bread”: we don’t think twice about this strange doubling turn of phrase: *today* … our daily bread. Does anyone else think that — to a poor person on living a hand-to-mouth existence, on a subsistence wage, this prayer might be a desperate plea for enough bread to get through the day? Could this be a prayer for people who don’t know where their next meal is coming from? Could this be the equivalent of …

Give us this day bread for this day.

Give us to-day bread enough for to-day.

And do we hear in this a cry for more than mere day-to-day survival:

Give us today our portion for today.

Give us today the bread of justice.

We have spiritualised and, over the centuries, sanitised the Lord’s Prayer, so that it has become something less specific, less concrete, more unrelated to any specific economic injustice and inequalities in our day.

And so need to rethink our relationship with money and the business of the church. But here is where Sam Wells’ book really helps us to reject the temptation to separate the spiritual from the material, practical, secular-facing side of the everyday, daily life of the church.

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The currency of the church is transformation and changed lives.

And this is why we can no longer afford—if we ever could—the luxury of concentrating all our efforts on Sunday morning church. We need a more comprehensive way of being the church, one that includes the true size of our larger footprint in the heart of the city. That’s what your Thursday lunch is about; that’s what your involvement with the school is about; that’s what your thinking about enterprise is about.

Church is far more than Sunday worship; it is the constellation of people and activity touching people, meeting needs, and transforming lives throughout the rest of the week! So how do we invest in God’s kingdom of grace in order to make that possible?

So here’s the question I want to leave you with. What can we do in the Grosvenor Chapel with the particular ministry God brings through these doors, and how do we continue to participate in the great challenge to break down the walls that would separate the church from the world, the secular from the sacred, the practical from the spiritual, towards a reimagined Church of England in this 21st century?

And what is our part in building bridges between Christian and non-Christian, faith and other faiths? And can we see why “Minding God’s Business” nothing less than charity, business sense and social enterprise all at once?

Whatever answer we come to, I hope we always stop to hear the words of the prophet Isaiah, living in a society of great inequalities and speaking to us from a distant past with an invitation to transformation to nothing less than an economy of gratitude and gift:

Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;

and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. (Isaiah 55.1)

Let this economy of grace be the future we want to see taking root in our today.

Amen.

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