

Bennochy Church 14th October 2012

It's one of those taboos in the church, you don't talk about money! Well, over the next three weeks, that is precisely what we are going to do!

The General Assembly of 2011 instructed all congregations to have a "stewardship season" each year and in Bennochy church, this will take place in the autumn, and on a three year rolling basis we will look at money, time and talents.

Stewardship is all about our response to what God has offered to us; in his creation, we are part of his giving of life; through his son, the Easter event was all about the giving of his love and by his Spirit, he breathes into us, the giving of new life. It is within this broad understanding of stewardship that we ask people to review their giving to the work of the church.

On a very practical level, the church needs money to maintain its ministry in local parishes and beyond, but stewardship is more than that, it is broader, it is deeper and calls not just for a practical response of increasing our offerings, but seeks a response based on sacrifice. We are called not to offer what is easy for us to give, but something that deeply impacts our lives, something that really makes us think of what we are giving and why. We give, because of what has been offered to us by God. It is not about 'keeping the show on the road'; stewardship has to far more meaningful and personal to us than that.

A man of means is going on a long journey and since transportation in 1st century Palestine was unpredictable, his return date would be uncertain, and according to the ability of his servants he leaves them in charge of a certain amount of money. It was not uncommon for wealthy landowners to delegate the control of their wealth to trained accountants, who could be free persons or in this parable, servants. They are given different amounts, but note, the money is not theirs, it is given in trust and even though the amounts vary, their responsibility is exactly the same. It is not the amount here that is important; it is what they do with it. This parable is all about money, but it could have been about all the other things that God has given to us to use responsibly and wisely for the work of his Kingdom; it is also about the use of time and the use of gifts.

The point of the parable is not about making a profit. The parable is not endorsing capitalism. We need to read the story at the level of a parable that has a different meaning and points somewhere else. However, in today's financial climate I am not so sure they would have been able to double their money quite so easily!

After a long time, the master returns and seems to be very pleased with the first two servants who have invested his money and doubled it. You have proved yourself with a small amount; you will now be put in charge of larger amounts, he

says. To double your money was seemingly normal and expected. We are not told how. One possibility would be to lend it to the money changers who would turn it into a profit to be shared or maybe lend it at interest, to the Gentiles.

However, the master's response to the third servant who dug a hole (equivalent of putting it under the mattress) and put the money in it; the safe option, is not so promising. What would you have done, be the entrepreneur or play it safe?

The 3rd servant seems to have a low opinion of the master (v24), he is afraid and hands back the same amount as he was given. 'Here is your money; I am no longer responsible for this anymore!' It is interesting that the master seems to confirm the servant's opinion of him, he does not deny it but says; at least you could have put it in the bank. He would not have got much interest today! His money is given to one of the others and he is cast out. We might think that is an over the top reaction?

So far so good, nice story, but what does it mean? What is Jesus saying to us? From the beginning of chapter 24, Jesus has been talking about the coming Kingdom of God, here, but not yet fulfilled. That is the context for this parable, and the original listeners would have grasped that. Miss the context and you lose the point of the parable.

The servants have in common with us the fact that we are all waiting for the return of the Messiah. The master is away on a

long journey and we do not know when he will return. Sound familiar? It is about living in this in-between period, before the promised return of Christ, literally giving of our best and using to the full, the things that God has given us, including our financial resources.

The final part of the text is probably out of place, it does not seem to fit well with the parable. However, what we can say is this; we all have a responsibility to use what we have been given by God wisely, because we hold these gifts in trust. They are not ours. So the talents of the servants in the parable, is their faithfulness or lack of it, in using what God has given them.

In the context of the world that we live in, where needs are many but the world has enough resources to go round, the challenge for us is, where does our responsibility lie? Surely not to bury what we have been given in the ground, but to 'profit' others, that they might have 'life, life in all its fullness'. Amen