

Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly London

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Luke 16. 19-end (The parable of Dives and Lazarus)

Money: let's change the conversation

The story goes that at the funeral of the Greek shipping billionaire Aristotle Onassis in 1975, someone was heard to say as the coffin went past – I wonder how much he left? And the reply came from an anonymous voice in the crowd: Everything.

Everything.

Today's gospel is like a one act play; one of the sharpest short stories Jesus tells – with strongly drawn characters, a vivid script and a colossal challenge to everyone who hears it.

Jesus spoke and taught a lot about money. A lot. Much more than he talked about sex.

So here's Jesus's short story. A man who was rich when he was alive has died and is being tormented for eternity. From his agony, he is looking up and seeing the poor man who used to live outside his house that he stepped over every day, in God's presence and at peace. And he knows that right now, having had all the economic power in the world when he was alive, there is nothing he can do about it now.

Jesus spoke a lot about money – and how connected it is to our emotions. This theme is part of his revolutionary teaching: and he really goes for it – **he doesn't spare our feelings** – going for tough subjects of family and money, friendship and money, inequality and money. And the huge power to destroy lives of debt.

What we actually do with the money that we **have, as Jesus's stories often describe, is** closely connected to our emotions; our need to feel secure, our hope, fear and often our **shame, that we're somehow just not as good as** other people with it. For some people, it will always be a struggle to save money. There just **doesn't ever seem to be enough to do that. For others it's hard to spend it** – it feels foolish, a bit profligate, wasteful: keeping it means that they are more independent, less liable to need help from anyone else.

What I want to do today is to try to be really true to the gospel in talking about money. I

want to try to stay very close to the spirit of the stories Jesus told and try to unlock some of the life in this one because what Jesus had to say about money was invariably very strong, bracing. So as we go along, I want to try to keep in mind that vivid picture that Jesus paints of the rich man begging Abraham to get Lazarus the poor man to come and relieve his pain with just a drop of water. **It's a scene that,** as they say on the news, some viewers will find distressing.

Immediately anyone in church, especially clergy, starts talking about money, some will **just be waiting for the moment when they're** asked to give money to the church institution; **and won't hear much in the run up to it because it's** a well-worn pattern that makes many feel bored, guilty or angry. So actually **although I'm not at all worried about asking** you to give money for our common life, in this sermon, for particular reasons, I want to say right at the outset that today I am not asking you to give money to the church. I want to try to think deeply about money in the light of this gospel story and what Christian faith has had to say about it. Over 2000 years of Christian reflection, Christians have developed various attitudes towards money, and not all of them are always very helpful.

First, money as a pollutant. Francis of Assisi likened it to excrement. He lived at a time (1181-1226) when European trade was expanding, banking was being developed, indeed his father was a banker, and so the exchange of currency was becoming more plentiful– perhaps he could see more clearly than most the painful and detrimental effects money could have on society as some people **prospered and others clearly didn't. For** Francis, money polluted everything and he taught and lived a mendicant lifestyle; with as little to do with money as possible.

Second, there is a strand of Christian teaching that sees money as a means to an end – a kind of instrumental way of looking at it. It goes like

this - **in some ways, we wish we didn't have to** deal with it but we recognise we can use it to the good. This approach in contemporary life **is often taken by those of us who don't like** numbers very much or who are under confident about finance. Bank statements or calculations about bills – all this is a chore. Budgets make us glaze over a bit – and this can be for a huge variety of reasons, not least because of under confidence, a bit of anxiety or guilt. In any case, it makes conversations in **church about money a bit tense; a bit "do we have to?" "I don't really want to think about it"** as, metaphorically, the post from the bank remains unopened.

The London School of Economics has a chaplain: **Jim Walters. He's written about this** recently and has suggested that perhaps we can think of money not as a pollutant or just a tool, but a language.

If money is a language, then that asks us the question – what do I want to say? What do you want to say with whatever money that you have? Like with my words, I have the potential to bring joy and meaning with it – even with a very little of it, I have the opportunity to enhance life, to bring assurance, hope, and delight. Of course I can also make people feel ashamed or belittled – just as I can with my words. I can cut people down with a snide remark I later regret – just as much as I can make people feel small by the way I use, spend **or don't spend my money. Money, like words,** in angry hands, can become a weapon.

But although money is a serious – **it's mostly** people who have some, who feel that we **shouldn't think about it too much. People who** do not have money, people whose everyday life is focussed on finding enough money to live certainly do think we should talk about it. **Perhaps like you, I've had periods of my life** when money has been very tight – and when **that's the case, you'll know that it becomes a bit of an obsession; it's hard to think of** anything else.

So just as we take care of the things we say, in order to build community, contribute to deepening our common life, to making friendships, we can similarly think of money as a language.

If I could trace the journey of this £10 note, I might find that I handed it over to a market

trader here in exchange for a wooden puzzle that my nephew spent many happy hours playing with. The market trader I gave it to put it in his wallet and paid for a packet of cigarettes in the newsagent across the road. The newsagent banked it and it was later given out to a woman drawing out cash to pay her cleaner. Her cleaner took it to the pub and bought a pint of beer where it was put into the till, and given out as change to a businesswoman buying a round after work. She **doesn't use cash much** – so it stayed there until on another night out she needed a cab home. The cab driver gave it as a tip to the guy who delivered his new washing machine who used it to bet on Tottenham winning the League. **He's still waiting.....**

The bookmaker gave it to her daughter who spent it on coffee at the hospital where she worked where it was given out in change to an older patient who spent it on getting her hair done on the ward to make herself feel better. She really did. She really, really did. What the **hairdresser did with it I'm not sure.....**

In imagining the journey of this £10 note, I've deliberately not chosen to imagine things like dealing drugs or paying to have someone hurt or buying a gun. Those things might seem more obvious. But this £10 note presents every **single person with a set of decisions. I don't** want to say choices because there are plenty of people who have very little choice in what they spend their money on if the rent on their room takes nearly all their benefit or wage. Our money or lack of it, presents us with decisions to make every day.

If money is a language, then actually I'd rather think of this £10 note not so much as a limited amount with a concrete **ceiling on what it's** worth – not a symbol of scarcity in other words, but as a token of potential. A token of temporarily suppressed abundance.

In trying to change the conversation about **money, I'd like to try and break a cultural** silence, in the spirit of this gospel, by trying **something with you in this sermon. I'm risking** that you will misunderstand me or judge me – **but I'm going to have a go at joining the spirit of Jesus's stories about money and see if it can** be for me and for us a symbol of abundance rather than an instrument of anxiety.

In the London Diocese, an incumbent – that is my role – is paid £25,637 pa.

Here are some of the ways that I spend this money. Every month I pay £40 for pet insurance – my dog is the only member of our family with private healthcare – I pay £30 a week to a cleaner, I have a direct debit which sends £400 a month to a savings account because I am hoping to buy a flat at some point in the future – although the truth is I sometimes get it back again to spend it. I give **£200 a month to St James's Church on our** planned giving scheme, pay £7.50 for my phone, I spend about £150 a month on my Oyster card, Gas and electricity comes to about £150 a month and my council tax is paid by the Diocese of London. I got paid £100 for the Radio 2 programme I did this morning. I feel as if I have enough money – I feel very fortunate to have as much as I do - **I'm also embarrassed** to tell you that as of this morning, I am £126.79 overdrawn until I get paid on 30th September.

In telling you what money I have and some of the decisions I make, I am exposing myself to your assessment and judgement – it may be that I am subject to some swift calculations amongst some of you – **and I'm trying not to** worry about that. But the reason I thought I might be a bit specific is an experiment in changing the conversation about money because I do think that our joyful use of it is closely allied to the trust we can have in one another.

And then the potential is very beautiful. Because if money is a language, then in itself it **can be spoken as the Lord's Prayer. Right at the centre of the prayer is the phrase "forgive us our debts, or trespasses, or sins" – it's translated** different ways – and importantly is **immediately followed by "as we forgive those who trespass against us". There is a prayer of** redistribution of power in the language of **money right at the heart of Jesus's prayer. Give us this day our daily bread we're asked to say –** and the answer comes – you already have it – the planet has enough food for everyone – **it's how it's shared that is the problem.**

I want to go so far as the American theologian William Stringfellow who argued that money can be nothing less than sacramental in the world; that is, that it can have a transformative effect – it can bring life.

Jesus's story is so powerful because, as usual, he engages our emotions as well as our spirits. Jesus never shies away from making us feel uncomfortable or stirred up.

He goes for the jugular, gently.

And the genius of **Jesus's scripts for his short** stories such as this one, is that we listen to the story and we condemn that rich man – we judge him – **and think he's cruel** – we judge his self-centredness and we sympathise with the poor man. But the story gets us all confused as the rich man tries to save his family, we recognise something there in us maybe. The point is that we are lulled into judging this character and just at that minute when we become self-righteous, the story switches, and as we realise that we are that rich man and the poor man at different times in our lives. There have certainly been times in my life when I have essentially been self-absorbed like the rich man; usually when I have been in some kind of distress; and if money has been a language, what I have wanted to say with my money is that I am angry at my circumstances **so I'll spend it on stuff I don't need – I've wanted to say that I don't care, or that "no one is going to sort this out except me". And in our** first reading, we heard that Paul calls this haughtiness. My own haughtiness as a rich person comes often from an insecurity that I **can't know what's going to happen in the** future and tries to control the future as much as is humanly possible.

One of the main clues to the meaning of this story comes from this pretty unpleasant character that Jesus creates of the rich person. **Even after he's died, he's still seeing the poor** man Lazarus as an instrument that can be useful to him, not a person. What does he say **to Lazarus? He doesn't say I'm sorry I didn't** see you before or I hope that you are at peace now. No, he talks past Lazarus and says to Abraham; tell him to come and give me a **drink. Even now, he can't see this person is a** person just like him. Even now he wants him to fulfil his needs, not the other way round. Even now, he is self-**absorbed, focussed on how he's** doing, and what can be done to make him feel better. Even now, as Jesus scripts for Abraham the chasm fixed between them in death echoes the one that was there in life.

No meeting point. No way to understand or listen or connect.

There is a brittle rich person inside me as I guess there might be inside you who will be lulled into a sense that there is a chasm fixed between people in society; that inequality is unsolvable, that we see our fellow human beings as essentially instruments of our well-being – not the other way round. Those brittle thoughts feed our fear and keep us self-absorbed and risk averse.

A Christian theology of money will always want to talk about its power to transform, to enliven, to bring life. But it will not ignore its toxic, unfairness either. Jesus often used the emotive language of slavery in talking about what pursuing money does to us; the pursuit of money is very often linked to our need for security – and worry about money imprisons us, keeps us awake at night, sends us off in the opposite direction to where we are led by the Spirit. You cannot serve two masters he said. Choose Life.

And so in that spirit, I'm not talking about the Church's need for money but switching it **round to say what St James's Church spends** money on, abundantly – we spend it on employment for 26 people in various ways directly which keeps this space open and peaceful for anyone who comes; we enable another 60 independent business people from every background and nationality – market traders – who on various days trade in our courtyard; we give grants to people formerly homeless helping them with white goods for their flats, we spend money on giving food and overnight hospitality to homeless men and women during the winter, we spend money on wine and bread, candles and craftspeople; on supporting the caravan counselling project, on employing an apprentice. We spend money on making music – we think that roughly 5,000 people played music in this church last year, with a much bigger number listening. We spend money on keeping open public debates in this place just in the past year, discussions of modern slavery, the future of trades unions, on the role of women as agents of change. We spend money on these Bibles – and we try to signal a different kind of economy when we **don't put a sticker in them that says St James's** Church please do not remove. We say – this is our Scripture – **it's both amazing and** challenging – please take it as a gift. We will buy more.

And so this £10 note doesn't just get "spent", it sings its way into the world, buying candles **that when they're lit turn into a prayer,** tuning the piano that plays Mozart that makes people cry, giving warm socks to a guy whose feet are almost rotten with cold. We want to make our money sing into the world a song of beauty and justice, generating what we want to think of as good economics, helping literally thousands of people pay their rent and have a life in this vibrant but unequal city.

If money is a language, what do we want to say? How can we make our money sing?

Breaking open the gospel stories that Jesus told is one of the things we do on the Camino course – **you'll see the leaflet in your service** sheet today. If you want to take some time to learn more, to share more, to have a lot of fun and to go deeper, then do come along this year on the Camino – we will wrestle with the mystery of the gospel, talk together about the difficulties of praying, talk about the challenges of living out our faith at work and in the world – and encourage one another to think and feel our way into faith.

So, today's gospel is just one example of the scandalous and revolutionary way Jesus's stories can land in a life. Today's just happened to be about money.

This parable tries to change the conversation about money and what it means.

Ditch the guilt, lance the boil of anxiety about the subject, and follow the greatest breaker of taboos - not as a way of keeping guilt at bay, but more from a sense that the language we want to speak is a language of love, imagining a new future; the kind of open hearted and open minded conversations that will allow us, as the parable ends, to be convinced even that someone has risen from the dead. Amen.