



The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 26th April 1998
by Mark Ashton

10p

Matthew 6:19-34

A Christian's Possessions 1: Where your treasure is

I must begin this morning with an apology. Particularly for visitors and those new to the church.

It is our normal routine at St Andrew the Great to preach our way through the Bible, trying to teach the whole counsel of God, book by book, week by week, letting the Bible set the agenda. But for three Sundays we are laying that on one side, because we are a Church facing a massive debt and the way we had planned to deal with it has been sabotaged by English Heritage's opposition to our proposals for the Round Church Building. That matter awaits a Consistory Court hearing in a month's time, or a Public Enquiry some time in the next two years.

But the massive debt can wait no longer and so we are holding a Gift Day three weeks from today, asking ourselves if we can give perhaps ten times what we would normally give at an annual Gift Day. Five years ago we learnt painful but exciting lessons about our money in this congregation, as we gave over £1¼ million to restore this building. It was not enough, and I conclude therefore that we need to learn those lessons again. Or at least I do anyway. So I am preaching these three sermons to myself on our attitude to what we own and how we give.

You will see that we have come in in the middle of what is called The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7). This is Jesus' own teaching and it is a clarion call to be different. In chapter 5 it was a call to be different in our moral conduct. The first half of chapter 6 is a call to be different in our religious practices: almsgiving, praying, fasting. And now at the end of chapter 6 we have a call to be different in our rejection of materialism. No longer is the contrast with the religious Pharisee—it is now with the secular materialist (perhaps a little more familiar to you and me today).

The scientific advance of these last two centuries, which has secured for us such mastery over our environment and over our health, has also brought to us a dangerous mental legacy: that observable things

are all there are. The modern mind falls naturally into materialism. And so Jesus says to us: *'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth'* (Matthew 6:19a). A special challenge to us who have at our disposal (all of us) treasure on earth beyond the wildest dreams of the people to whom Jesus was first speaking.

He says in verse 24: *'You cannot serve both God and Money'*. And this is a very special challenge to a society that is entirely obsessed by the acquisition of material possessions—clothes, cars, houses, gadgets, entertainment. So much of our security lies in these things.

Clearly Jesus knew the importance of this issue, for He says the same thing to us in three different ways—three metaphors for one choice:

- (a) Two places to invest (vv. 19-21)
- (b) Two ways to see (vv. 22-23)
- (c) Two masters to serve (v. 24).

We're going to concentrate on just the first of those.

1) Two Places to Invest

'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (vv 19-21).

Notice it is not the nature of the treasures that Jesus is discussing, but where we invest our treasure.

There is nothing wrong with money, as such. The Bible teaches that it is right to provide for our relations for example (1 Timothy 5:8), to provide for the future (Proverbs 6:6-8), and to enjoy the good things that God has given us (1 Timothy 4:3-4; 6:17). These verses do not prohibit being provident (making

sensible provision for the future). They prohibit being covetous (like misers who hoard, and materialists who always want more).

But it is folly as Christians to think that we are in the former category (being provident) while we act and think like the latter category. We hoard (do you find yourself hoarding? I hoard all the time) and always want more (I always want a little more)—like the miser or the materialist. And the folly lies in where we are investing our treasure, according to Jesus.

It is of the nature of material things that they do not last: ***‘Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.’*** Inflation erodes the value of the most secure savings and pension plans. All material things in the here and now are passing away—that new car that we’re so grieved about when it gets the first scratch on its nice paintwork. Where is it going to end? It’s going to end on the scrap heap: absolutely certainly, however we guard it and keep it and preserve it and wax it and polish it. Those clothes of which you were so proud when you put them on: the new jacket, the new blouse—where are they going to end up? That house (when we get to that stage) that we take such care over and we insure and we paint and we look after so well—what’s going to happen to it? It will fall down eventually.

Even the Round Church which we have been looking after for eight and a half centuries—what’s going to happen? It’s not going to last for ever, it will go. My own body (I’m very aware of this; more perhaps than some in the gallery are at this stage)—age is eroding it. I’m still stiff from a game of squash yesterday. Death will steal it away.

Do I realise that? And do I act as if I know it?

We try to have a discipline in our household, that the more valuable the thing is that gets broken the more we try and remind ourselves that that’s what it was fated for, that’s what was certain to happen to it.

A priceless artefact, thousands of years old—how’s it going to end? Eventually it’s going to break and fall apart and disappear. King’s College Chapel—it will fall down.

It puts a rather fresh perspective on our own culture’s current mania with preservation. The less you believe in eternity the more you hang on to the things of the here and now. In the light of eternity, all of it is quite futile. It’s all heading for the scrap heap. We can invest our treasure here in such things, but Jesus calls us fools. That’s what this passage says to us very clearly.

Imagine that a man goes into the Fitzwilliam Museum here in Cambridge and he finds his way into a picture gallery and starts taking some of the Old Masters off the walls and tucking them under his arm in a proprietary way. “What are you doing?” someone asks him. “I’m becoming an art collector,” he says. “But they’re not yours,” we say, “you can’t take any of them out of here!” “Of course they’re mine. Look, I’ve got them under my arm. People are looking at me as if I’m very important as I walk around the gallery, and I’m not bothering myself with thoughts about leaving. Don’t be a killjoy!”

We would call such a man a fool, would we not? But don’t you catch yourself tucking things of the here and now under your arm and walking about as if you own them, and acting as if you’re not going to have to leave?

There was a funeral for a banker, at which they sang that great hymn, ‘Guide me, O thou great Jehovah . . .’ There was one little misprint in the order of service: instead of ‘Land me safe on Canaan’s side’, it read ‘Land my safe on Canaan’s side’. But there are no pockets in a shroud. Pickford’s won’t even quote for a move to the hereafter.

‘Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal’ (v 20). Jesus is all for investment: wise investment where we get the best interest rate (heaven), and where the market is not crashing as it is here on earth.

(Do you notice that He doesn’t say that there won’t be any thieves in heaven? He just says there that thieves won’t break in and steal. There’ll be plenty of thieves in heaven—converted thieves.)

How can you and I store up treasure there? We need to ask ourselves what goes to heaven (and I’ve given it away by what I’ve just said). What goes to heaven? People go to heaven. You and I will take our characters to heaven. So what does the New Testament say to us (because we are well-to-do in New Testament terms)? It says this: ***‘Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life which is truly life’*** (Paul writing to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:18, 19).

You and I are going to heaven if we’re believers, and other people are going to heaven too. And we can play our part in helping them to get there, so Jesus said: ***‘Use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed [they will welcome you] into eternal dwellings’*** (Luke 16:9). They are only going to be able to do that if our wealth

has helped them to believe and trust in Jesus, so that they are there to welcome us when we join them.

There are wonderful investment opportunities open for Christian wealth. And there are few more accurate indicators of the true state of our hearts than how we spend our money: *‘For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also’* (Matthew 6:21).

Lest we think that the investing Jesus advocates is only for capital appreciation in the hereafter, He goes on to show that it is also wise in terms of current income here and now (He’s talking about a balanced portfolio as we call it).

We’re not going to have time now to look at that, because we’re going to jump the Two ways to see and the Two masters to serve. They face us with the same choice. I’m going to move on to The Answer to Worry.

2) The Answer to Worry

I think we are well aware today of the debilitating effect of anxiety. Some here will remember the establishment of the National Health Service, half a century ago. It was the great dream of its founders that it would save the nation money by the elimination of disease. It seems a little droll now—looking back on it. But that’s what it was to do. It has gone a long way towards eliminating many of the major diseases of those days, like polio and tuberculosis and scarlet fever and smallpox. But it certainly hasn’t begun to save the nation money, has it? And that is partly due to the upsurge in stress-related diseases during these post-war years. Half the hospital beds in the country are occupied by the mentally ill. It’s a fact we conceal from ourselves in our society. Valium is the second most prescribed drug on the National Health. Heart disease, gastric ulcers, coronary thrombosis, perhaps even some forms of cancer are thought to be stress-related. It’s been said that an ulcer is something you get from mountain climbing over molehills.

Aware of the debilitating effects of anxiety in the office, there was one office manager who put up one of those little placards on the office noticeboard. It was meant to cheer everybody up and keep them going, and it said something like, ‘Don’t let worry about the future get you down. After all, today is the tomorrow you worried about yesterday.’ And somebody had written underneath, ‘And now you know why!’

Jesus says to us in these verses that Christians are not to worry because they have (a) A Father to trust (vv. 25-32), and (b) A Kingdom to seek (v. 33).

(a) A Father to Trust

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?’ (v 25). If we are worrying about food and clothing we are forgetting that there is a God who gave us life, Jesus says. You and I are not here on earth by accident. We are here by the will of God. Our lives will last until His purposes are complete for us, and not a moment longer. He made our bodies; they’re His gift to us. *‘Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?’* If God gave us this precious gift of life, can we not trust Him to care for us in other ways also?

‘Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?’ (vv 26, 27). We’re not told to imitate the birds, but to look at them. And from the birds we learn a vital lesson. It’s not that they are idle, or lack forethought: birds work very hard for their living (just watch a little tit or a sparrow in a tree to see their busy activity); and of course some have the forethought to migrate south in the winter (there’s another lesson we might learn from them!) But birds don’t fret, they don’t worry about tomorrow. They display activity without anxiety.

Said the robin to the sparrow:

‘I should really like to know
Why these anxious human beings
Rush about and worry so.’

Said the sparrow to the robin:

‘Friend, I think that it must be
That they have no heavenly Father,
Such as cares for you and me.’

But that isn’t quite what Jesus said in verse 26, is it? Do you see the difference? He doesn’t actually say *their* heavenly Father feeds them, He says *your* heavenly Father feeds them. The birds trust a Creator in a way that we human beings do not trust a Father. *‘Are you not much more valuable than they?’*

One cause of worry and anxiety is unbelief: our disinclination to believe that God made us and therefore cares about us. At the root of anxiety lies the thought, *“I matter more to me than I matter to God.”* And it is those with that attitude whom Jesus addressed as *‘O you of little faith’*. The person of little faith has a little God: a pygmy God, too small to care about the details of our lives—so that we have to worry about them for ourselves.

Jesus says to us, “Look at nature.” Now we’re very inclined to do that, aren’t we? We love to look at

nature; but then we go and draw the wrong conclusion. We look at some lovely wilderness view and we think that God must really care about that place, or that creature. He must really be present there, it must be very close to His heart. And then you and I look at ourselves in the mirror and we think (well I do) “*What a sight! How marred by sin I am!*”

But do you see how different what God is saying in these verses is from that? He says, “Yes, look at the wonders of the natural world; but then think that if I, God, take that much care over the natural world, how much more do I love you for whom my Son died? It cost me but a word to create the natural world. It cost me the life of Jesus to bring you back to myself, to give you new life.”

God is not appalled at the sight of my face. He actually prefers it to the Giant Panda. Christ didn’t die for the natural world. He didn’t die for the humming bird, or the fur seal. He died for you and me. Look round at the faces here in St Andrew the Great at the moment. Jesus died for you and for me. That’s what this Communion is a powerful reminder to us of.

And one answer to worry is that we stop believing in that pygmy God, locked up in the wonders of nature and distant and remote from you and me in our lives here and now; and we start believing in the real God, Who is more than great enough to take care of every worrying little detail of your health and your life and your family and your degree, and your possessions.

Well, we have got a moment for our final thought: a Kingdom to seek. It’s just one verse.

(b) A Kingdom to Seek

If we would face all our unknown futures without worry, there is only one place to put our trust. “*Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*” (v 33). In the last resort (despite the NIV heading to these paragraphs), Jesus is not saying, “Do not worry”, without qualification. He’s saying, “Don’t worry about the material necessities of life, degrees and Ph.D.s and houses and salaries and prospects and children’s prospects and all these things, and health.” He’s saying, “Don’t let those things dominate your thinking. Worry instead about the things that are worth worrying about: God’s kingdom, and His righteousness.”

You see, in one sense human beings were made to worry, to seek goals, to have ambitions, to strive for things, to serve ideals, to be concerned. We weren’t made to drift aimlessly through life, like plankton being eaten by whales. The true goal of humanity isn’t the Buddhist removal of desire, that does away with all seeking and longing. The true aim and goal of

humanity is to fasten the God-given longings of the human heart back on to God Who alone can satisfy them. “*Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.*” Worry about the things that matter, and you will not know that debilitating anxiety that afflicts most of our lives most of the time.

If we put first things first then all the rest of life will fall into shape: ‘ . . . *all these things will be given to you as well.*’

All these things have a place in our lives: but it’s second place. They have an importance of their own: but it is a secondary importance. And if we get our priorities right, then we will be saved from fretting our lives away on what are actually trivialities.

That was a very fast and a very brief and a very superficial look at some of what I believe are the most important teachings for this age in the New Testament. Can I encourage you now quietly to re-read from verse 19 through to the end of the chapter?—as we turn our minds to the Communion.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)