

Treasure in Heaven.

A Sermon preached at Pott Shrigley, March 20th, 2022

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Cards on the table this morning: I am not poor. Despite the cliché of the impoverished clergy, I do have money. I have savings and an income, I own a house: I even have the promise of a pension when I retire.

I wanted to say that, because I don't want to seem to take the moral high ground this morning as I talk about our money; what our attitude towards it should be, and what God might be calling us to do with it. As if I was saying, 'This sermon is for *you lot*, with your *money...*'. It's for me too; and, like all Christians with money, I think I face some difficult questions:

'Can money make you happy?' – it can't. 'Should you put your trust and your hope in it?' – you shouldn't. 'Is it true that the love of money leads to all kinds of evil?' – it is. 'If we love our money, can we love Jesus too?' – we can't.

We will in fact be looking into some of these very truths this morning; but it's useful to acknowledge that we do so as people who *do have* money: greater or lesser amounts of it, certainly – but money, none the less.

One thing this means is that on some level we have all come to the conclusion that it's possible to be a Christian and to have money. And I believe it is. But I also believe that the many dangers which money poses to our relationship with God, to our very souls, are ones of which we should be intensely aware.

Remember the Rich Young Ruler – a good and sincere man who really wanted to follow Jesus? When Jesus said that, for him to follow, he needed first to get rid of his money, he couldn't do it. He was *sad* not to do it; but he *didn't* do it, all the same¹.

Do I hold my wealth lightly enough that I could leave it all in a heartbeat if Jesus asked me to as clearly and pointedly as He asked that young man? In all honesty, I don't know: I hope so; but I suspect a part of me is desperately hoping He'll never ask – or, at least, that I'll not hear Him if He does....

Or what about the man reaching retirement, of whom Jesus spoke in a parable? He had built up a nice pot of wealth for himself: barns filled with valuable grain; so full in fact that he was just about to build newer, bigger barns to store it all. Enough wealth, he thought, to fund a very enjoyable lifestyle for years to come. Except....those years never were to come: 'You fool', God said to him, 'This very night your soul is required of you; and as for all that you have prepared, who will own it now?'²

Do I pay lip-service to putting my hope in God alone, whilst secretly hoping that my stash of cash will, one way or another, see me through whatever may lie ahead? It's actually obvious that it can't and it won't: something will come along – illness, bereavement, disaster, death – from which my money is completely unable to protect me. And yet, even though I know it's a false security, it's very tempting to put my hope in my wealth to see me through whatever lies ahead.

The elephant in the room at the moment is the war in Ukraine. At a stroke that has revealed the folly of trusting in anything else other than God: of feeling secure because of wealth, or because of status, background, ability. Suddenly, for everyone in that country – or at least for

¹ Mark 10:17-2

² Luke 12:13-21

those in Mariupol, Lviv, Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa and the rest – money and possessions have either gone up in smoke, or have become useless and irrelevant. And which of us has not thought what it might mean if this crisis engulfs us, too? Or some other crisis if not this one? All those plans of the nice things our money was to get us? They will be the first thing to go.

And even if it doesn't all go in one big moment of crisis, wealth certainly *will* go. Why hoard money, only to see it go down in value, eroded by economic shock? - or, as Jesus puts it, 'by moths and rust'. He wasn't giving the 'investments-may-go-down-as-well-as-up' warning: but he *was* giving financial advice:

*Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where moths and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.*³

And he went on to say: *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* Which, of course, takes us right back to this unpopular but unavoidable truth: **our attitude to money strikes right at the heart of our relationship with God.** As Jesus said to the rich young ruler: *No-one can serve two masters, you can't serve God **and** money.*

Treasure in Heaven: the ultimate gold-plated investment opportunity! So, how *do* we invest in heaven? Well, it's not just about money, of course – it's about what we prioritise in all areas of our life – time, gifts, energy: *Seek first the kingdom of God*, said Jesus; prioritise *God's* business. But it *is* about money, too: the danger is that we think that our wallets are somehow exempt from God's claim on our lives. They aren't.

Now, let me be very clear: I'm not trying to use some 'spiritual blackmail' to persuade us all to give money – or to give more money – to our church. Yes, it's true that what we do with our money is an important part of our faithful response to God. And it's true that this *will* mean giving away money which, if we were *not* Christians, we might feel completely entitled to keep for ourselves. But *how much* we give, and *to what*, is a matter between ourselves and the Lord. I hope, and believe, that many of us will believe that a significant part of our giving should be to our church, but this must always be our own free choice.

I wonder if I'd be talking about giving, though, if it wasn't for the financial challenge we constantly face together as God's people at St Christopher's..... I know it's never a popular subject to talk about in church: I remember once being heckled by someone from the back saying that I shouldn't be doing so. And it's true that some preachers avoid the subject; while some congregations are only too glad for them to do so!

Perhaps, then, it's a blessing that finance, money, is a constant challenge within the life of our church: a blessing, because it forces us to address a vital matter which we otherwise might avoid.

And those financial challenges often do come as a surprise to many: especially if, like me, you are not great at pouring over the parish accounts. In a nutshell: currently, to be St Christopher's Pott Shrigley, costs around £2,000 per week. That's £285 *every day*: whether the times church is full of bustle and activity, or the dark cold winter days, and the weeks of the holiday season, when church life is quiet. Even when church was in lockdown. And, of course, whether *you're* here or not! Suppose you're away for a couple of Sundays; by the time you're back, on the third Sunday, since you last saw him our Treasurer has had to find Six Grand!

And, contrary to popular belief, we have to find all that money ourselves; realistically, most of it will always come from the generous giving of our members. And much of that giving is indeed generous, and neither I, nor our wardens, nor our church council, take it for granted. Our

³ Matthew 6:19-21

income is currently £1,600 per week – most of which is from us lot. That's a lot a commitment, sacrifice and love. It's a lot of investing in Heaven. And it deserves acknowledgement and grateful thanks.

You might also notice that £1,600 is £400 short of £2,000: we are running a deficit. This of course is not sustainable, and we do need to achieve the healthier situation where income is covering expenditure. What has saved us, for now, is that over the years we have received a number of legacies, which have provided us with a financial buffer. And, while at this rate these reserves will not last too much longer, legacies have been a real blessing to the ministry of this church. If this is something which you might wish to consider, then we have a booklet which give more detail on legacy giving to the church.

We're all human; we find it hard to part with money. What's more, it's harder some times than others; depending upon our mood, or our situation. It is essential that we recognise this, and don't leave our giving to be determined by, say, how we feel on a Sunday morning. It must simply be part of our regular routine; not something we'll get round to, or do 'when we feel moved'

In our busy lives, the only way for many of us to achieve this is to set up some regular system. A standing order from your bank account has some real advantages⁴. But giving envelopes – in which our regular amount is placed, whether we attend that Sunday or not – also provide a regular discipline. A simple leaflet from Sally, our Giving Secretary, gives you the information you need.

I hope this sermon will prompt you to think and pray about your giving: perhaps to increase it - or, indeed, decrease, if your circumstances dictate; or, if you are not part of a regular giving scheme, to take the opportunity to put that in place.

But may I finish by celebrating all that is already given – by so many of you, and, most of all, by God. Let this wonderful poetic imagery from the prophet Isaiah, this morning's reading, celebrate His amazing generosity:

*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?*

*Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food....*

*Ho, 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.*⁵

⁴ Account name: Pott Shrigley PCC. Sort code: 05-05-68. Account number: 40103719.

⁵ Isaiah 55.