

1 TIMOTHY - MONEY

(Ecclesiastes 5.8-15 and 1 Timothy 6.3-19)

This is the last of our sermons on Paul's first letter to Timothy.

Paul wrote this letter whilst in prison in Rome. He had left Timothy as pastor of the churches Paul had founded in Ephesus.

Timothy was having a difficult time, he was relatively young and the Christian Church was under pressure from within. Paul describes the churches as questioning Timothy's authority quarrelling teaching false doctrine. There was envy and strife. Men even made money out of their godliness. Timothy's main problem was to keep the faith pure.

This reminds me of the theology department at Durham University in the 60's when I was a student. Bible criticism at the time was subversive and un-Christian. Some lecturers made money out of their pet theories. One taught that the apostles were under the influence of a hallucinatory drug made from magic mushrooms. I thought he was a complete fraud - a bit like some of the American Evangelists who became TV stars.

Is that what Paul is speaking about?

This last chapter of the letter is more reflective than instructive and mirrors the first reading and the teachings of Jesus. After describing the situation in Ephesus Paul explains how money and godliness don't exactly go together. This reflects Jesus' comment that 'you can't serve God and money'. Paul notes that those who are godly will be content with what they have - provided they have food and clothing. Godliness with contentment brings great gain. Wealth is so uncertain but if you put your trust in God he richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. God wants us to enjoy life.

Our first reading was from Ecclesiastes and is part of an Old Testament group of writings known as Wisdom Literature. The writer of Ecclesiastes looks at the same theme but extends the discussion to include society as a whole. I like two of the verses 'Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income'. Ecclesiastes is often spoken of as an atheistic book. It isn't, but the God portrayed there is a distant unknowable figure. The writer uses the word 'meaningless' 26 times. It's a book without Jesus. Nevertheless he can write 'the sleep of a labourer is sweet, whether he eats little or much but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep'.

Some 200 years later Jesus has the same message but extended. Jesus says how hard it is for the rich to get into the Kingdom of Heaven. Then he tells the story of the man storing excess grain in barns and then larger barns - and then he dies! He warns that wealth brings worry - there's damage and thieves. Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven.

On the face of it, it is surprising how much Jesus speaks about money and wealth considering how most people had little or no money. In the Roman Empire a third of the population were slaves who had nothing and women and children were the same.

When I was growing up on the wrong side of the tracks in the poorest part of Middlesbrough no one I knew had much money.

My mother used to say that money wasn't worth wasting sleep over so long as you had a roof over your head and sufficient food but it was useful for moving around to where it was needed. My Grandma used to say, 'Cast your bread on the waters and it will return after many days' - I don't think she knew this came from Ecclesiastes.

A big proportion of the world's population still have little money although those individuals and institutions with great wealth also have great power over people. What is the problem with money? - Well nothing really. It is our attitude towards it that is the problem. People forget what money is for and it becomes an aim in itself. But there is nothing wrong with bettering oneself.

This letter emphasises that the acquisition of money can be like a drug.

Many years ago I used to take children to Dukeshouse Camp School at Hexham. The Deputy Head there used to work in the city making money. She worked long hours often arriving and leaving in the dark. One day on the way home in the dark on the tube she read a copy of the Journal Newspaper. There was an advertisement for this job at the Camp School. She thought what am I doing here? What do I want all this money for? She went home resigned from her job and applied for the job at Hexham. Money had become a drug.

How do we avoid our money becoming an idol? Paul tells that instead of concentrating on our possessions we should be growing more like Jesus. Concentrate on doing good deeds being generous and willing to share, giving thanks for our plenty, living simply.

John Wesley worked out how much money he needed a year - £28 and gave away anything he earned that was more than this. We could try this.

It's very difficult to live differently when we are bombarded on every side by a relentless pursuit of riches and celebrities. Advertisements, political manifestoes, films are designed to make us say, 'If only I had just a bit more money, then I would be content' - but it's never enough.

It's difficult to go against the tide but there is an alternative.

Jesus said we should live a life building up the Kingdom of God and practise righteousness, love, endurance, faith, gentleness and godliness. Godliness - there is that word again. What does it mean?

We sometimes forget that we who follow Jesus have the greatest treasure - the greatest gift within us. With God's Spirit within us to guide us and to change us how can we fail? We need to pray that he will save us from money and possessions taking over our lives. A society or an individual that values money and wealth for its own sake has forgotten how to be truly human. We are promised contentment if we live life Jesus' way and act as a model for others. Let's try.

Lord, bring to us all the joy of believing.
Help us to change the way we live so that we grow more like Jesus.
Where there is extravagance and luxury,
May we sow the love of simplicity.
Where there is greed and the desire always to have more,
Let us sow contentment.
Where there is envy of what others are getting, let us sow humility.
Where there is indifference to the sufferings of others.
Let us sow compassion.
In the name of Jesus we ask this.

(Bishop John Moorman)