

The Buck Stops Here!

Amos 8⁴⁻⁷; Psalm 113; 1 Timothy 2¹⁻⁷; Luke 16¹⁻¹³

Acceptable in the sight of God [1 Timothy 2³]

One of the draw-backs in being the Rector of the Parish is that when you get given a set of readings like those set for today you really can't delegate the sermon. Today we need to take seriously what the Bible teaches about other ways to God and then we need to have a word about our attitude to money. Fasten your seat-belts!

Paul in writing to the Christians in Ephesus through his 'apprentice' Timothy is writing to make sure that they are engaging in worship that would be helpful to the Christians who gather there as well as being acceptable in God's sight.

- ✦ He first of all wants to emphasise the partnership - the word translated as **urge** is much more companionable than that: he is calling the Christians alongside him so that they and he can learn together.
- ✦ The principle lessons in the part we read are to do with prayer. The nouns used teach us about praying: **supplications** remind us that we pray out of need; **prayers** - the word generally used for praying in the NT - remind us that whether in public or private our prayer is a conversation with God; **intercessions** remind us that we have to pray for others and be bold with God for their sake; **thanksgivings** (from which we get our word Eucharist) reminds us how much we owe God and that we should express our gratitude for all that he gives.
- ✦ Paul goes on to remind us that our prayers should be made **for everyone** and even in the context of a Roman Emperor who was not a friend of the Church or Christians that we must pray **for kings and all who are in high positions**.
- ✦ We are told that because we have prayed our lives should be **quiet and peaceable** and we should not be troubled after we have prayed - things are left in God's hands; that we should be known for **godliness** so that God's life is seen in our own; and that we should have **dignity** in our conduct through which we betray our confidence in God.

Which leads us, after a bold statement that God **desires everyone to be saved** to the declaration of faith: **there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all.**

The image of a *mediator* is like a bridge, and the bridge in question is a toll bridge. You can attempt other ways to cross the divide, but this is the one secure way. You drive to the toll married and simply state that Jesus has paid for you and you cross safely and freely.

The much maligned late Bishop of Durham, Dr David Jenkins (who served his curacy at Birmingham Cathedral) was a very creative theologian. He summed the creed up - *God is; God is as he is; God is as he is in Jesus!*

Jesus is God's way to be reconciled with him and there can be no sidestepping that in theology or practice!

The reading from Amos condemns the treatment of the poor and the Psalm states clearly that **God raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap**, which leads us nicely to the Gospel which records Jesus' teaching about our attitude to material possessions. Eventually we end up with the clear statement that **you cannot serve God and wealth** - you can have both, but not serve both.

A person can make very grand claims about being a follower of Jesus but they are not truly converted until their attitude to things and money are converted too!

Yet this parable is a difficult one and needs just a little exploration:

- ✦ It is difficult to read the words **his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly** and then to go on to note Jesus saying **make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes**.
- ✦ The steward is an example of one who lives as **a child of this age** and the challenge is to live as **children of light**.
- ✦ He has been caught in false accounting - probably adding a bit to the bills in his masters name and then pocketing the difference - he knows this is serious and says **I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg** - which is why he is prepared to make use of his own money and to cut the bills owed by the creditors after he has been caught and brought to account by his master.
- ✦ It is against the teaching of the OT to add interest [Ex 22²⁵, Lev 25³⁶⁻³⁷, Dt 15⁷⁻⁸ & 23¹⁹⁻²⁰] so this income stream is immortal if not technically illegal. If we were honest any profit in business or in interest from the bank is immoral if not illegal - for anyone to gain someone has to lose. A business makes something and sells it to a customer who will then add their cut and sell it on. A bank offers a mortgage and charges interest and then pays interest to those who have money on deposit.
- ✦ One commentator on this passage offers: *The reason the manager was now commended, though he had previously acted dishonestly, may be that he had at last learned how one's worldly wealth can be wisely given away to do good.*
- ✦ If you have any money at all it is probably dishonest money - it is how you use it that the parable and Jesus himself says makes the difference. The great Father of the Early Church, Tertullian, said: *nothing that is God's is obtainable by money*, and John Wesley said, *when I have any money I get rid of it as quickly as possible, lest it find a way into my heart.*

Money is like women (at least, to a heterosexual like me): can't live with, can't live without - it is the quality of the relationship that counts.

Dibley, the senior Rectory dog, is going through a difficult patch - she is simply stubborn. If things aren't going as she likes she simply flops down as if her bones had melted and does not move whatever the enticements or threats.

Christians are all too often like that. They are happy when things are going as they want them to and then simply refuse to accept or do things that don't suit.

The buck stops with me for interpretation, but we all share equally the need to do what God says:

- ✦ Jesus is the way to God.
- ✦ We all have the responsibility to be good stewards of all that God gives us - and where our heart belongs is seen in whether we own our money or our money owns us!