

"JESUS AND OUR WEALTH"

INTRODUCTION The sermons on the Sunday mornings in Lent this year are attempting to explore the mind of Christ on a variety of subjects.

Three weeks ago, on the First Sunday of Lent, we thought about Jesus and what it means to be human. Two weeks ago, we again turned to Jesus; this time to his example of selfless service and together we thought about what it means to be of service to others. Last Sunday, we considered Jesus and prayer. We saw that it was a vital part of his life and that he intended it to be a vital part of our life. Today, on this the Fourth Sunday in Lent, the Sunday when we celebrate the One Great Hour of Sharing, we turn to the subject of Jesus and our wealth.

DEVELOPMENT It's been reported that the following letter was actually received by the Internal Revenue Service:

"Gentlemen:

Five years ago I cheated on my income tax. This has caused me considerable worry and I haven't had a good night's sleep since. I am enclosing twenty-five dollars cash. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the balance to you".

Money has robbed many a person of a good night's sleep. All of us expend a great deal of energy - physical, emotional and mental - in the direction of our money and the handling of it.

My cigar-smoking friend, Vince, who works over here at the little print shop on 87th Street where we can most of our printing done was showing me recently the method he's adopted to protect his wallet. He recently was pick-pocketed on the IRT. He pulled out his wallet and after showing me all the bills he had in there, he then proceeded to display a twenty-inch piece of chain, one end of which was fastened to his wallet and the other end to his belt. "I'll fool 'em next time" he said. "They won't get far". He went on to say he was headed out to the race track that night for a little entertainment. I saw Vince earlier this week. "Aw Reverend" he said, "I can't win. I didn't lose my wallet. But I lost what was in it. I lost over a hundred dollars on the horses that night. Didn't dare tell my wife".

Money - making it, counting it, and handling it. Lending it, loaning it and losing it. Spending it, storing it, and stealing it. Betting it, borrowing it and banking it. Jesus often touched upon the subject of wealth. Money was one of his favorite subjects. Rather than single out one or two of his utterances on this subject, I want us to live our way again into his encounter with a young man who was mastered by his money.

RICH YOUNG RULER The account of this man is found in all three synoptic gospels. Matthew tells us that this man who sought Jesus out was young. Mark tells us he was ruler. All three - Matthew, Mark and Luke - tell us that he was rich. Young in years and larger in fortune, this man ran up to Jesus, fell down on his knees and asked, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus looked at him and said, "If you would enter life, keep the commandments" "Which ones?" he asked. Jesus replied, "You shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not bear false witness, honor your father and mother. Love your neighbor as yourself."

But to Jesus' reply, this rich young ruler made an astounding response. He said to Jesus, "All of these I have kept from my youth up!" Jesus didn't challenge the assertion. For the moment he let it pass. I suppose any man who would make such a boast really doesn't have a very good line on himself. And the fact that the man had come to Jesus on his own for help was an indication that all was not well. Probably right from the start Jesus sensed that this young man's difficulties centered in his inner attitudes toward people. The seeker goes on, "What lack I yet?" What he apparently wanted was one further command that might provide some peace for his tortured, restless spirit. "What lack I yet?" Give me something more to do and I will do it.

But Jesus did not give him what he wanted. His need was not to do something, but rather it was to be something. Said Jesus, "Sell what you have, give to the poor, come and follow me". One more law he could have managed, but what does a man do when the One who stands before him, representing the Absolute, asks for a total investment of his life in the purposes of God?

It all reminds me of an upsetting experience I had back in grade school. It took place on that day when the teacher said that henceforth we would no longer be writing on ruled paper, but we would do what the older folks do when they write letters - use paper that has no lines. How I missed those nice even lines. Now my handwriting was on its own. Perhaps this is something of the turmoil this man experienced when Jesus called his whole being to attention and summoned him to total surrender. "Sell what you have, give to the poor, come and follow me!"

MAN WAS LOCKED UP

Now we're not to conclude from this answer of Jesus that Christian discipleship at its best is going to include the vow of poverty. The Gospels do not suggest this. Peter, after all, kept his boats, his nets, his house. And Zaccheus after his encounter with Jesus gave only half of his goods for the purposes of justice and mercy. And Jesus was very much at home with the Publicans who were men of substantial wealth. Jesus was not denouncing wealth as evil, but he did counsel against it as a danger. "How hard it is" said he, "for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God".

Sell. Give. Come. Follow. Jesus recognized that the man was caught in the grip of his own wealth and this is why he spoke as he did. The man was obsessed by his own wealth. Jesus was doubtless thinking of the poor who might be serviced if this man were to liquidate his holdings. But I believe his primary concern here was with this man who was "locked up" in his concern for his growing fortune. The record says that Jesus looked upon the man and loved him.

It reminds us that God has a way of finding the hot spot in our lives. It may be sex, or power, or vengeance. For this man, it was money. But the grim point stands that there is no way of going on with talk about religion and duty and knowledge of God until we come to terms with that particular obsession - whatever it may be.

Some may be tempted to say that Jesus wasn't a very good salesman at this point. After putting before the young man the demands of the kingdom, he stood and watched while the man turned and walked away. No salesman would do this. Couldn't he propose easier terms? Why did he not shout after him, "No reasonable offer will be refused. 10% 20% Surely we can work something out". But the demand stays. The terms remain unchanged. "Sell what you have. Give to the poor. Come, follow me!"

But the record says, "He went away sorrowful" - one of the few ever to depart from the presence of Jesus with sadness on his heart. He had come to the near bank of the Rubicon, but would not cross over. Life beckoned but he turned his back to it. Seem him as he trails off down the distant road, his shoulders stooped beneath the weight of a rejected opinion.

RICH YOUNG RULER AND OURSELVES

ourselves....our country.

I find myself from time to time drawing similarities between this rich young ruler and

As a nation, we are young as countries go. We're a major power in the world. Our wealth is unprecedented in the annals of human history. Rich, young, and powerful. This too, like the young man, we have a way of seeing ourselves as a good people - possessed of high ideals, fine traditions, friendly, outgoing, protectors of democracy, generous to others.

And yet - like this tragic figure who came and threw himself at the feet of Jesus, we must confess a certain uneasiness inside. I think we're a troubled people. We seem to lack the ability to find a dominant, controlling purpose. Some say we are in danger of losing our soul. We cry through our journalists, through our novelists, through our playwrights, through our teachers, through our preachers, "What lack we yet?" Why is it - with so much - can we not put it all together and have the kind of land in which we can all rejoice together? The answer that keeps coming back to disturb us is for many tied in with those words of Jesus, "Sell what you have, give to the poor, come and follow me".

We're not following him, really, like we ought to be. On a world scale, we are like an island of affluence in a surging sea of poverty. And for all of our self-adulation for the amount of money we give away it was pointed out to me recently by one of our laymen that there are still some ten or eleven countries in the world that provide more foreign aid than we do on the basis of percentage of Gross National Income.

Some time ago someone brought our world into brilliant focus in a study of an imaginary city of 1,000 people representing the entire world. If, in our imagination we might compress the total population of the world, now more than three billion persons, into a community of 1,000 persons living in a single town, this is a picture of the contrast we would see.

Sixty persons would represent the present population of the United States. The rest of the world would be represented by 940 persons. The 60 Americans would be receiving half of the total income of the community. The other 940 persons would share the remaining half. The 60 Americans would have 15 times as many possessions per person as all the rest of the people. The Americans would produce 16% of the world food supply, yet would eat 72% above the minimum food requirements of the rest of the world. Most of the non-Americans in this imaginary compressed community would be poor, hungry, sick, ignorant. Half of them would be unable to read or write.

That's the picture in terms of the world community. Right here at home we problems. have too many people who continue to exist in poverty, or who live on the barest possible level of subsistence. Central cities with their ghettos ringed by the affluent suburbs.

NEED TO DIVEST

More and more I am coming to feel that the critical verb in the hand-writing on the wall is the verb "divest". Sell, give, come, follow - divest. We have long since mastered the science of investment. Now we are being called upon to develop skills in the area of divestment.

Divestment of power, of privilege, of wealth. Our greed and our wealth are fast uniting the poor of the world against us. Is it not clear that in the interest of our future, not to mention our internal peace, we must learn to divest.

Here at home, what will we do about this disparity? I'm not speaking here of the disparity between the "haves" and the "have mores". I am not convinced that it belongs to the state or to the church to see that every one is leveled off. But rather I speak of the gap between the "haves" and the "have nots". I am trying to speak for those who for a variety of reasons, largely not of their own making, have been unable to get out of the starting gate - who aren't in the race, who aren't competitive, and who are thereby degraded in their humanity because they don't fit and can't contribute.

These people don't have enough clout, even if they were to organize along the lines of some power groups, to take anything over for long. A few calls here and there and any revolution would be quickly crushed. But what they do have and what they are going to use is this capacity to obstruct. They, under God, will develop ways of seeing to it that none of us will truly enjoy anything until all of us can enjoy something. "No man is an island" said John Donne, and George Bernard Shaw, speaking on poverty said:

"The saying that we are members one of another is not a mere pious formula to be repeated in church without meaning: It is a literal truth - for though the rich end of town can avoid living with the poor, it cannot avoid dying with the poor".

THE CHURCH AND ALL OF THIS: Where does the church come in on all of this? The church cannot sound this call to exercise divestment standing on its own record without being guilty of some hypocrisy. We know this. And what we are being called upon to do these days is to divest ourselves of our power, our leadership, and our wealth. And churches and church members are finding it to be an exceedingly arduous and anguishing matter. Token benevolence is one thing - but giving (as our friends in the Southern Baptist Church sometimes say) - giving until it hurts, really hurts - this is something else and good for character, too. And many of us in the church end up walking away like the rich young ruler unable to follow Jesus's challenge to sell, give, come and follow.

There's a book on the market entitled, Magic With Leftovers. I don't know whether it's about the kitchen or the church. After close to fifteen years in this church as minister, I think we would acknowledge that we have worked some fantastic magic with left-overs that many have given us - the loose change, the remnants, the odd bits that people couldn't fit into their pattern of prosperity. What we are being called upon to face up to is to come up with something more than left-overs that remain after we have fleshed out our dreams, done what we've wishes, acquired all we want, taken the trips we've planned. We are being confronted with the challenge to revise our understanding of giving, of budget, of those stubborn questions that seem to persist and to give even more to those areas that reflect human need.

Let's face it: much of what we give through the church to the world is really given to the church for ourselves. It's like the person who said to me some time back that he was willing to give to the church because of an interest in a particular program in which he would be one of the primary recipients. This is giving to himself. Mature churchmanship goes far, far beyond this.

In seeking to deliver the state from the shackles of wealth, the appeal is to self-interest. For our nation, it is becoming increasingly a matter of life and death. In the church, however, I would hope that we would have a higher motivation than self-interest. The church, above all else, must insist and proclaim that whatever a man may or may not be economically, he is a man - first, last and always. His manhood does not derive from his capacity to produce, nor from his pocketbook. He is a man first and a worker second.

It belongs to us in the church who have been sensitized by the spirit of Christ to think of poverty within our own city, nation and world - not in terms of statistics, percentages, case numbers - but in terms of people, human beings, with faces, with needs, with hopes, with dreams - like ours! "What lack I yet" said the rich, young ruler to Jesus. "Sell what you have, give to the poor, come and follow me". To this invitation to make an investment in love, each must give an answer.

PRAYER It is not easy, O God, to follow in the footsteps of Him whom we call Lord. Forgive us that we so easily lose sight of people, behind a screen of bricks and stones and mortar; behind a pre-occupation with bank statement, stock dividends and personal security; behind a wall of so many excuses.

Deepen us, in the days of Lent, in terms of our discipleship. Beget in us the will to share. Help us to live our days in a measure of love that is practical, concrete, out-going, giving of ourselves and of our substance to those who have so little or nothing. Help us, to make this "investment in love". Amen