

“...and they were watching him”

Gosh isn't it so true – everybody watches everyone else!

From Big Brother to the economy and politics of envy -- always being watched and always being judged, and not least in the way we spend our money.

When Mother Teresa was alive she was harshly judged for spending so much money on people who were dying anyway. Poor and destitute they may have been, but they were hopeless cases, and her critics have suggested that the money donated to the Missionaries of Charity might better have been spent building hospitals, or working for social change to tackle poverty as a whole. The children of this age don't easily perceive the value in tending to those who are already at death's door, and who can offer nothing in return. They perceive only a loser's love, given to losers.

Oscar Wilde described a cynic as “one who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.” A Christian should be the reverse: one who has less interest in the price of a thing than in its true value.

You've will have heard the joke about the the little boy who told the vicar that when his father saw him coming, went and hit his wallet. All Clergy will have been told somewhere, and often, that the church is too tied up with money and property, and everything should be given to the poor.

When I was a curate, the parish in which I served faced a serious financial crisis. Everybody wanted the church, but few would put heir money where their mouth was. In my naivety I suggested to the rector that we close the church doors and move the worship into the church hall which was cheaper to run. I wqas rebuked severely for taking my eye off the heritage that had been entrusted to us. We might not need a church today, but someone might one day. I was faced with the same issues in Ireland, and even here today there are those who would be happy to close this magnificent place and follow the example of one of my illustrious predecessors in the 19th century who hired room down the street! The balance between price and value is seems impossible to find.

We will no doubt continue to be watched over the question of how we deal with our financial defecit.

Were you ever asked to write an essay in school with the title, “The adventures of a pound note.” Nowadays a TV series could be made tracing the history of a fifty euro note in our times. The average banknote has a life-span of just over twelve months, they say. After being well used and passing through many hands, they are recalled and incinerated. It would be fascinating to follow its story from the moment the fresh crisp note comes off the mint to its burning in the incinerator, some twelve months later. Every crease on it, every stain on it, would have its own story to tell. God only knows where it has been and what it has been spent on, good or for bad. It has its joyful mysteries and its sorrowful mysteries. It might even have its glorious mysteries. Its last owner could have used it to buy a fix of heroin or cocaine, or bribe someone to secure a contract, or buy an official’s silence. It could have been picked from a pensioner’s pocket, or paid a prostitute for her services. It could also have bought medicine for a sick child or education for a gifted one from a deprived background. And all the countless presents it might have bought to bring some joy into otherwise bleak lives. It could have been an anonymous donation to a worthy cause. It could have been a poor person’s gift to someone more needy than themselves. It could have been to the Third World and back. It could have fed a whole family there for a week.

Many worry about devaluation. They complain about the shrinking purchasing power of their money and they about what their notes could have bought, when they were young. But in a sense money is only devalued by the use we make of it. *“Use money, tainted as it is, to win you friends,” Christ told his disciples, “and so make sure that when it fails you, they will welcome you into the tents of eternity.”* We may well be depressed at how little it can buy on High Street, but in the poor back streets of this world, it’s a precious and elusive thing.

Why was the parable of the Unjust Steward included in the gospel, we might wonder. Surely it was because of the Church’s concern about the proper use of goods from earliest times. Great personal wealth is rarely acquired without some sharp practice, certainly in those days, and so Christ refers to money as somehow tainted. By and large our own society, like that of ancient Israel, is not really organised for the common good, or for the welfare of ordinary people.

In our attitude to money and property we must keep in mind the words of Jesus, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the merciful, blessed are those who strive for justice.” Such people will find true self-fulfilment and the greatest reward of all, of possessing God himself for all eternity, or rather of *being possessed* by God for all eternity.

God is not safe, but is always good, full of surprises and turns our world upside-down.

This is not what many of the religious people of Jesus’ day signed up for and neither did we. We want a God who is just and fair. We want a God who is predictable and follows the rule of law. But instead, what Jesus points to is the realm of a God who seeks the wanderer, celebrates the lost, forgives the proud and repairs broken relationships. This is a God who is certainly not safe but is always good.

Throughout the Bible, and particularly in today’s Gospel about the shrewd steward, we are confronted with a God who takes our norms, our expectations, our perceptions and our preconceived notions and turn them on their heads. Jesus praises the manager’s insanely irresponsible behaviour and exhorts us to act more like the manager!

This is just crazy, upside-down grace. We who hear his story want him to pay for his dishonesty, not to get out of a sticky situation smelling like a rose. What kind of moral example is this?

Well, it isn’t one. What Jesus seems to be highlighting in this story, which we can perhaps see more clearly by comparing it to the story of the prodigal son, is the ridiculous nature of God’s grace, and our call to live in it.

What Jesus thinks his followers are capable of is what he himself has been busy doing: healing, reconciling, truth-telling, and proclaiming the kingdom. We must be as clever as the manager in today’s gospel, with a different goal: serving our self-interest, alongside the best interests of the world that God loves, by building the kingdom of God.

We are called to be shrewd about recognizing grace and sharing it. We are called to love things heavenly, by loving God’s creation, seeking justice for everyone,

Perhaps most importantly, today's gospel is centred on one action: forgiveness. The manager intends to make his own situation better when he forgives his master's debtors, but the more he thinks about it, the better it gets: the people who have owed his master more than they'll ever be able to repay are suddenly going to have their burden lightened, and that's going to make the master look good, and that's going to make the master happy, and that means the manager won't lose his job. Everybody wins. Forgiveness – which is an act, not a feeling – has positive consequences for everyone.

We can get hung up on the undeniable fact that the person in the story who forgives is acting dishonestly and manipulatively, and we'd like to distance ourselves from that kind of behaviour. But Jesus chooses his story illustrations carefully, and this one sticks in the memory precisely because it's outside the boundaries of any conventional morality tale.

Forgiveness and its consequences are central in this gospel and in the story of the prodigal that precedes it. No matter who does the forgiving, it's going to create ever-widening circles of positive consequences.

Forgiveness, Jesus seems to be saying, is the starting point for building the kingdom of God, and of course, this cycle begins with God's grace toward us. If God kept score, we would be in some serious debt, like the people who owed more than they could pay in today's gospel. But God's grace precedes our entire existence, and if we choose to be kingdom-builders, we begin by accepting God's grace, and extending our own forgiveness to others. There is really no other way to transform our limited sense of tit-for-tat justice into an expansive sense of God's justice and mercy.