

'A deeper wisdom'

A sermon by Andrew Knowles at St George's Kendal, on Sunday 18 September 2016 (Trinity 17).

Readings: *Amos 8.4-7; 1 Timothy 2.1-7; Luke 16.1-13*

'No slave can serve two masters . . . You cannot serve God and wealth'

Luke 16.13

Preachers have been ducking and diving the past few Sundays, because we've been confronted with some very direct one-liners from Jesus.

On September 4th we had Luke 14.33: *'None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.'* Today it's Luke 16.13: *'You cannot serve God and wealth'*

How are we going to get round that one?

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Peter Owen Jones is a vicar, and journalist and broadcaster.

In 2009, he embarked on a very interesting experiment for a TV series entitled *How to live the simple life*, in which he tried to follow in the footsteps of St Francis of Assisi and his rule of poverty.

We saw him tell his Church Council that he was going to do this. He handed over his cheque book. He assigned his income and television fees to his wife and children - and he set out to live 'by faith' with nothing.

He stood outside his local supermarket asking for food and received a few bananas. He took a job at his local pub, cleaning and washing up. He tried, with little success, to gather shell-fish and keep chickens to get some protein. And he set out across the country to visit a wise man who had, for many years, advocated and lived a very simple life . . .

Peter's conclusion was that it couldn't be done. He would have starved. And, on his cross-country journey, it was a Muslim family which saved the day, taking him in and giving him an evening meal and a bed for the night.

Is this what Jesus means?

'You cannot serve God and wealth'?

I don't think so.

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Over the past two weeks, we've been visited here at St George's by an American couple; a free-church minister and his wife, Roy and Joy Lawson, from Tennessee. They attended our services and joined in the coach trip.

Roy is 78, Joy a little younger, and one of many interesting things about them is that they've sold up or distributed all of their possessions. They're travelling light with only their hand baggage, and have no immediate plans to return to the United States.

Unlike Peter Owen Jones, they have money in their pockets – they're not risking starvation; but they're experiencing what it is to live without their usual burden of possessions and routines. Roy is getting to like it and Joy is beginning to *not* like it . . .

Is this what Jesus means by *'You cannot serve God and wealth'?*

I don't think so.

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Jesus was a carpenter or joiner, he was a teacher and healer, a wonder-worker and, along with all of those things, Jesus was also known as a *wise* man.

A wise man would deal in proverbs and sayings and stories – his own or other people's, or a mixture of both; proverbs and sayings and stories which shed light on the right way to live - hard-won insights, like our own everyday proverbs:

'Look before you leap'

‘There’s many a slip twixt cup and lip’

‘A miss is as good as a mile’

‘A stitch in time saves nine’

Some of Jesus’ sayings are like that: ‘*No slave can serve two masters*’ is one of them. Everyone knows it. It’s the world’s wisdom – the wisdom of the world.

But some of the proverbs and sayings and stories of Jesus direct us to a *whole new level* of wisdom. The world’s wisdom is all about how to succeed, how to avoid danger and mistakes; how to get rich, or powerful, or famous . . .

Jesus describes *that* wisdom as a ‘broad way that leads to destruction’ and ‘many’, he says, ‘find it’.

Instead, he speaks of a ‘narrow way which leads to life’ and ‘those who find it’, he says, ‘are few’.

[‘Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.’

Matthew 7.13,14]

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Our readings today are about how we live with compassion, integrity and freedom in a complicated world. How we can be alive to God as our top priority while navigating the powerful currents and storms, the almost irresistible magnetic force fields, of the world as we know it.

The prophet Amos gives examples of *not* getting it right:

God’s people *know* that he is a God of compassion and mercy, of honest weights and measures, of fair prices, of care for the poor, the needy and the vulnerable . . .

And yet there are those who are *taking no notice*: who trample the needy, who ruin the poor (Amos 8.4), who put business and money-making before their duty to God (8.5a); who bias weights and measures to their own advantage (8.5b); who *own* people and exploit them without mercy (8.6), reducing their lives to destitution and misery.

And, says Amos, God sees what they are doing – and God will remember when the time comes for judgment . . . (8.7).

If Amos gives examples of getting it *wrong*, the First Letter to Timothy gives examples of getting it *right*. The author writes of living prayerfully, thankfully and without boundaries towards everyone (1 Tim 2.1) – all the way up to the highest human authorities (2.2a) – because it is God alone who can give peace and enable godliness and dignity (2.2b).

His argument is that Jesus gave his life as a ransom for *all* (2.6), irrespective of wealth or rank ('everyone' 2.4) – and when, in our intercessions, we pray for the world, for our worldly leaders, and for all people – *this is what we're seeking to do*: by our thankfulness and prayerfulness, to love as God loves – and as God has loved us.

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In our Gospel reading, Jesus invites us to *a deeper wisdom* than the way of the world. He tells a complex parable about a dishonest steward, who's about to be sacked, who cooks the books to win goodwill – so that at least some other doors may open to him when his master's door slams shut.

Jesus then asks his hearers how *they'll* be placed when the reckoning comes – because if they're not at home with God, they'll need a Plan B.

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But '*Not serving God and wealth*' is much more exciting than that!

The wonderful thing about Jesus is that he lived with an absolute, intimate and joyful trust in God.

'Look at the birds' he says, 'they don't sow or reap, yet your heavenly Father feeds them' (Matthew 6.25);

'Consider the lilies – they don't toil nor spin, but they're better clothed than Solomon' (Matthew 6.28-9).

Jesus teaches *a deeper wisdom* than the wisdom of the world. The wisdom of the world is the wisdom of 'how to get on' in the world: of 'achievement, affluence and appearance'

[Marcus J Borg *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (HarperCollins, 1995) p87]

Jesus describes that wisdom as ‘the broad way that leads to destruction’. Instead, he invites us to trust in God as he himself has learned to do: God before reputation, God before possessions, God before all other relationships: a way he describes as ‘the narrow way that leads to life’, as ‘perfect freedom’, as ‘dying to self and living to God’.

This is completely different from the wisdom of the world, because we step into a relationship in which God in Christ *serves us*.

Jesus waits on us to respond to our needs: ‘*Ask and it shall be given you*’ (Matthew 7.7; Luke 11.9);

Jesus kneels to wash our embarrassing sins, to cleanse and forgive us: ‘*Unless I wash you, you have no share in me*’ (John 13.8);

Jesus lays down his life for us on the cross, to atone for our sin and conquer our death . . .

‘*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son*’ (John 3.16).

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‘*You cannot serve God and wealth*’

When we think of what God has done for us – and continues to do – and will always do, because this is an eternal covenant – we want with all our hearts to serve only him.

And, wonderfully, that is to find ourselves at last fully at home in this world. We live in a material world – a world of ‘stuff’ -and our bountiful God gives us ‘richly all things to enjoy’ (1 Timothy 6.17).

It’s not about trying to live on nothing like Peter Owen Jones, nor selling up and taking to the open road like Roy and Joy Lawson. It’s about embracing the created world, to steward and care for it; to be joyful, generous and thankful – and to find, in his service, ‘perfect freedom’.*

*[The Collect for Peace, Book of Common Prayer].