

God's 'Big Society'

Sunday, September 19th 2010

sermon by Revd Dick Wolff

Amos 8 : 4 - 7

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat." The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: 'Surely I will never forget any of their deeds'.

Luke 16:1-13

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.'

Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth*."

(See also 1 Timothy 6 : 6 - 19, which includes "the love of money is the root of all evil")

* in the Greek : "Mammon"

Note : It is most likely that what the ‘manager’ or ‘steward’ is doing is writing off the *interest* due on the debts, which according to Torah should not have been charged anyway. By doing this, he casts his boss in a good light – which is why his boss actually commends him.

“Your boss got the money exploitatively and now he’s sacking you for incompetence. I, Jesus, don’t blame you if you ‘cheat’ him by giving back some of his ill-gotten gains (even though you don’t have his authority to do it) in order to regain support from those whom he exploited. Ultimately, you are dependent on them, not him.”

The ‘stewards’ of our time are the bankers. Our bankers have been incompetent with our money. They themselves have borrowed from the markets far more than they could pay back; in turn they have lent it recklessly – locking poorer people into debt – in the process driving up house prices and freezing young starters out of housing; they’ve invested and lost our money in multi-billion pound gambling schemes. The result is a whole society in slavery to debt. But they’ve paid *themselves* handsomely. Indeed, they are virtually the only ones not now in debt to anyone. Therefore they are the masters now – so much so that even our government has handed over its power to them and is doing their bidding, afraid to challenge them, telling us that ‘cuts are inevitable’. The cuts are only ‘inevitable’ because our governments have given all their other powers* to the banks. Although of course, it’s the rich and powerful who are in government now – at the very least, the gap between government and super-rich financiers continues to close (witness the recent appointments of HSBC Chairman Stephen Green as unelected trade minister and billionaire businessman Philip Green as – admittedly unpaid – government adviser on, er, making cuts. A task in which he is joined by Tesco’s executive director Lucy Neville-Rolfe, company secretary of a string of Tesco’s holding companies in Luxembourg, set up to enable the company to avoid paying UK tax. Now *that’s* ‘efficient’!). The revolving door between government office and big business remorselessly turns. The money men have taken control of government. They did so long before the election.

Could the bankers have chosen a *different* path – the path Jesus seems to commend here? Could they have started by writing off debts to ordinary people, and especially the poor? That might have been a way of injecting money back into the economy and starting to rebuild a ‘Big Society’. (That was precisely the message of a sermon I preached in Banbury two years ago, which was warmly welcomed). Instead, it’s the banks

* the three main levers of economic management are : (1) the printing of money (money supply), (2) setting of the interest rate and (3) fiscal policy – raising and spending taxes. British government has given control of (1) to the banks, who are enabled to create money in the form of debt; and (2) to the Bank of England.

themselves who have been bailed out, leaving the people as much in debt as before, but with a strong likelihood that now they'll get less for their borrowed money than before. And those with no credit rating will be left out in the cold. The poor will get poorer and the rich will get richer. And the rich, with their appeal to their *twisted* version of the 'Big Society', are going to be asking the churches to step up to the plate and put more effort into helping the poor. I'm inclined to say, "you've *created* the poverty, and *you've* done very nicely out of it – don't ask us to let you off the hook. But, sure – if you like, we will be happy to help the poor. To *fight* your cuts."

Why did they *not* write off people's debts, like the crafty steward in the parable whom Jesus commends?

Because it would break the rules of global finance, and that would never do. The great god Mammon must be worshipped. We have all chosen to serve Mammon, and the financiers are our high priests. We have made ourselves slaves to him (although the high priests do not *feel* like slaves because he has rewarded them so handsomely). But "you cannot serve God and Mammon" (Lk 16 : 13) – it's either/or, says Jesus. Bankers, do the *Christian* thing : renounce your gods, break your own rules – write off the people's debts. Government, do the *Christian* thing : don't be so gutless – dare to spend what you haven't got and raise two fingers to the gods of the global financial markets. Then, maybe, God will welcome you back. Or even if God won't, maybe the people will.

This is a crazy message, of course. Who remembers Neil Kinnock at Labour Party conference ridiculing the Militant councillors of Liverpool who took this sort of 'go-it-alone' line and ended up hiring taxis to drive around the city handing out redundancy notices to their workers? Cities can't go it alone; even *countries* can't. Look at Greece. But if *enough* governments did that, the global financiers would be powerless. 'A dream', you say? No, it's not a dream : it's a *vision*. Not *my* vision : it comes directly from this gospel passage – which sees through the idolatrous mess global finance has got us into, and envisages a better way. *God's* way.

Actually, if the global financiers let governments get away with it (as the rich landlord in the parable does), they might come out smelling of roses themselves; they might find they were once again able to move about in wider society without being despised by the common people (as they are). They might actually become members of society again, instead of a peculiar religious sect with offshore bank accounts, walled in behind security fences – or domiciled in Guernsey* or Monaco. Heaven knows

* "Welcome to Barclays Wealth International : Enjoy our range of UK, international and offshore banking, savings, investments and mortgage services designed for international clients and residents of Jersey, Guernsey, Isle of Man and Gibraltar."

they don't need any more money. (I wouldn't know how to spend half a million pounds on myself, let alone twenty times that.) Now *that* would be an interesting version of the Big Society – one in which the ‘fat cats’ actually behaved as if they belonged to it, instead of keeping their vast wealth in offshore tax havens – or actually living there. “We’re all in this together”? Don’t make me laugh!

The Gospel message for our time from this passage is quite clear to me : ‘Do not be swayed by talk of the inevitability of cuts. That is a pagan heresy in a supposedly Christian nation. The Gospel is a fundamental challenge to the whole corrupt, idolatrous business. It does not have to be this way.’

But with the Gospel, there’s nearly always a twist.

Don’t forget, either, the price that was paid by the Son of God, the *true* High Priest, for living and proclaiming the outrageous forgiveness of debt, and living freely as a ‘slave’ of God rather than Mammon. Standing up to the ‘fat cats’, forgiving debts he wasn’t authorised to forgive (like the steward in his own parable), was to cost him his *life*.

True salvation for our nation would be (I’m sorry to say) *more* costly than we or our rulers dare imagine. *They* think the sacrifice that’s needed is the one which the god *Mammon* demands – cuts, cuts, cuts. So they will encourage us to cut and flagellate ourselves on our knees before the altar of Mammon as a sign of our repentance (at *their* failure!) . . . pathetically pleading with the gods to love us again; sending up clouds of incense smoke from burning redundancy notices to appease them. In fact, as I read this gospel, the sacrifice *God* demands is more dangerous. It’s to risk the wrath of the gods of the global market-place by *refusing* their demands, *refusing* to pay them homage, risking their wrath by recklessly lifting the burdens of the poor instead.

Who, in this nation, has *that* sort of loving courage? Our politicians – those that aren’t already terminally ‘lost’ to God, that is – only have their hands on the levers of power if we the people put them there. It is the *people* who must wake up from their sleep, see through the idolatry, and share the risk of standing up to it. If they did, then “if the British Empire lasted a thousand years” (as Winston Churchill once famously said) people might say “This was their finest hour”.

But with the BBC and every media outlet pouring out the appeasement message of the inevitability of ‘cuts’, and ridiculing our gospel message as some other-wordly superstition, what chance of *that*?

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