

St Margaret's Thornbury 11.30am

Ecclesiasticus 2: 1-6

Ephesians 5

Mark 10: 17-22

It's good to be here. Thank you for your welcome. I look forward to many years of working together in partnership, mission and ministry.

Ecclesiasticus 2: 'If you aspire to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for an ordeal'...

St Margaret of Antioch, whose day we mark and celebrate today, is known as the slayer of a particular dragon – namely Satan. Well, the story may be apocryphal, but I wonder which dragon we need to slay in our own lives? Is Mammon one of them?

There's a story told of a man who had worked all his life and had saved all of his money. He was a real miser when it came to spending. He loved money more than anything, and as he was very ill, he said to his wife, 'Now listen.... when I die, I want you to take all my money and put it in the coffin with me.'

He got his wife to promise him with all of her heart that when he died, she would comply with his wish. Well, one day he died and his body was laid out in the coffin. His wife was sitting there in black, and her friend was sitting next to her. When they had finished the ceremony, just as the undertaker got ready to close the lid, the wife said, wait just a minute!

She brought out a box and put it in the coffin next to the body. The undertaker sealed the coffin and rolled it away. Her friend said, 'Girl, I know you weren't fool enough to put all that money in there, and risk not getting it back.'

The man's wife said, 'Listen, I'm a Christian, I promised him that I was going to put all the money in the coffin with him.'

'You mean to tell me you put every penny in the coffin?'

'I certainly did,' said the man's wife. 'I wrote him a cheque.'

Risk is endemic in human affairs. To say to someone 'I love you' or to say in church 'I believe' can never be risk-free undertakings. When we say these things we're investing in things that are not always fully under our control. The other person may not love you back. The God in whom you stake your trust may turn out not to exist.

The French philosopher Pascal famously argued that if believers are right about God's existence, then they have gained everything. But, if they are wrong about it they have lost nothing. It is an attempt to eliminate risk from believing. But where you invest your heart and soul can never be risk free.

All commitment, whether it be financial, emotional or religious, is subject to the possibility of failure. That's life. It may well be that the attempt to eliminate risk can, in extreme forms, turn into an attempt to eliminate life itself.

In Shakespeare's Othello, Othello is so determined to eliminate risk in a relationship with Desdemona that is fully under his emotional control, that he ends up destroying the very object of his love.

The giving of ourselves is needed if love is to be real. But it is precisely because Desdemona is giving herself totally, but is not under his control, that drives Othello mad. His desire for absolute certainty and risk-free love is what transforms the play into a tragedy.

But it's not just in love where we can lose our way. It was the Brazilian Archbishop Camara who once said, 'When I feed the poor they call me a saint; when I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist'.

In his book, Dethroning Mammon, the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby looks at the subject of money and materialism. The book reflects on the impact of our own attitudes, and of the pressures that surround us on

how we handle the power of money (mammon) in the book. Who, he asks, is on the throne of our lives? Who will direct our actions and attitudes? Is it Jesus who brings truth, hope and freedom? Or is it Mammon, so attractive so clear, but leading us into paths that tangle, trip and deceive?

According to Jesus, the people who had the most problem were the establishment, the well off, the wealthy and the well to do. For them, maybe it was that their material possessions and their status had got in the way of leading a Godly life, and that's a challenge for us all.

In a world where a reported 10% of the population earns over half of the income, the other 90% must be hoping that the 10% are the kind of people inclined to share it out. But what happens if the richest people in the world are not Warren Buffett or Bill and Melinda Gates?

You and I know that you can't legislate for generosity, but you can protect people against lack of it. There is very little evidence to show that people become more generous the wealthier they get. There was a time when some people believed that the trickle-down effect would work as a rising tide lifts all boats. But the trickle-down effect does not account for human nature. People tend on the whole, to hold on to what they have.

Whether or not people earned a lot, Jesus had a view on what we should do with our wealth. As the parable of the rich man who went away sad or the rich man who built a bigger barn to store up his extra goods, brutally illustrates, holding on to what we've got, is not a healthy option: on the very night that the rich man who built bigger barns was congratulating himself on having enough wealth for years to come, he died.

It's not that God needs our money or our stuff; it's about transforming us into the kind of people who are inclined to share all they can. In the end, it's not how much we have, it's what we do with it.

It was Desmond Tutu who said 'my humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.'

In the Old Testament, however rich or poor you are, God's design for human relationships is summarised by the prophet Micah. 'He has shown you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love mercy and walk humbly before God.'

This is a comprehensive view of life which presents a seamlessness between personal piety and public duty, between private relationships, communities and our instruments of state.

Justice, mercy and humility are indispensable for the wellbeing of any society. When there's a great disparity between the haves and the have nots then there's a toxic mix in the making. If we don't want to be controlled by what is toxic and life-denying then we need to heed Jesus' words: 'Come follow me.'

Rev. Albert Gayle.