Ministers-at-Work

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Editorial

Once again we are at a point of transition, as we try to find our way out of the pandemic. I don't know about you but there remains something of the feeling of Groundhog Day about this.. an endlessly repeating loop of activities and outcomes. However, it does seem this time as if things are improving gradually, even in areas like ours which are 'Enhanced Response Areas'. Peoples' lives and work are gradually emerging into the new 'Endemic Covid' world. It is a new place. The way we live and work will be different.

For some the balance between home and office has been permanently changed. For some life is improved but for others work has become relentless. High streets have lost some players, and others have found it necessary to adapt – for example increasing their online presence while reducing space for face-to-face marketing. Hospitality has struggled through with furlough, and now is grappling with the combination of a

competitive job market and the so called 'pingdemic'. Healthcare workers continue to manage the latest wave of Covid alongside a torrent of other needs. Education establishments at every level are using some of their vacation time to work out how they can operate safely and deliver good quality learning going forward. Charities and voluntary groups too are among those searching for new ways to continue their activities.

The constant vigilance, the need to follow ever-changing rules and now the continued threat of the virus as the government has lifted almost all of the legal restrictions we have lived with for 18 months, in favour of asking us to work out what is safest for ourselves and those around us, is demanding high levels of attentiveness and resilience - from individuals and organisations. Each of us, in the places we are, will be called to work our own way through, and to support our colleagues through the transition.

In this journal we begin with a discussion about callings to work in different situations and settings: it was stimulated by a piece in the April *Ministers-at-Work*. Other such offerings will be welcome. Two papers look respectively at wealth and tax, raising some challenging questions for 21st century Christians. Eric Knowles explores the idea of success, in a world in which many previously taken for granted assumptions about this have been overturned. A final piece looks at ideas about eternal life. Enjoy!

Pauline Pearson

Vocation or not? – Dorrie Johnson

I read Rob's contribution to Ministers at Work April 2021 following the Reflective Day Career, Calling and Vocation. I immediately wanted to respond.

Caveats - I was not present for the day's reflection, I do not know Gill and I take Rob's reflections at face value. I may make, therefore, assumptions that neither of them meant and I apologise if that is so. I was captured by the differentiation I perceived as being made between secular and religious vocation. Is a religious vocation perceived as a call from God whereas a secular one does not have that theological impetus?

This is a personal story so please skip it if you consider it out of place.

My partner had worried over the question of 'was he being called?' I understand why dogs may be seen to shake a slipper furiously and be described as 'worrying at' it. My partner's arguments had something of that about them and even on the way to post the first letter to start the process off, he turned back twice.

He went to an ecumenical theological college on a part time course (he was a full time college lecturer) for three years - some weekends, Holy Week, every Tuesday evening. At the dinner served on the evenings they attended the Principal made a point of joining students. At one of the first evenings my partner was seated next to the Principal and in the conversation mentioned that he was concerned that he had interpreted accurately God's call to a vocation. The Principal's reply was to the effect that it was not so much recognising a

calling from God as identifying what he himself wanted. That, for my partner, was a liberating idea.

The church we were attending at the time had a vicar with a rather different view of churchmanship than the one we held. As my partner continued training for ordination there was some pressure placed upon him to shift his position. I watched with concern. In the meantime partners were regularly invited to the theological college, sometimes to share a session with the students, sometimes to have separate sessions as a group. I attended as one of those partners. I

could see little difference between my choice to begin a nursing career (it happened by accident but that's another story) and the way various impulses had led people into ministerial training. While my partner was in his final year the suggestion was put to me by the Principal, strongly supported by one of the lecturers, that I might consider ordination. This

was before women could be ordained. My response was to laugh it off but neither man let it go. Eventually, vaguely interested but primarily to appease them, I promised to enquire and possibly risk setting the process in motion.

One factor did interest me in that if I had a line of reasoning to counter that of the vicar I could argue the toss with authority. I know - not a very 'Christian' viewpoint but honest. I went to ABBM - it was ABBM in those days - with a less than enthusiastic attitude and the clear belief that the response would be negative and release me from pressure. It wasn't and so I would start training end on with that of my partner. As an ecumenical college it was far more liberal than some other colleges would have been at that time. The men who were sponsored by the Church of England on this training course were likely to become priests. I was the only Anglican woman, could not be ordained at the end of the three years, (this time is pre-history) so to legitimise my training I had to participate, simultaneously, in the ecumenical women's course (it meant extra placements and extra essays).

BUT and it was a big but, I did not want to stop nursing so I asked if 'church' ministry could be combined with nursing. It had not been done before in my diocese of Coventry but it started then. I was licensed to the Diocesan Officer for Social Responsibility, continued nursing and became a deaconess and a practising minister in secular employment.

What happened to any idea of God-called vocation? If the idea of vocation is central to the Christian belief that God has created each person with gifts and talents oriented toward specific purposes and a way of life, I had had no sense of it. I

had no awareness of a call from God to devote my life to a church ministry of any sort any more than I had sensed a vocation to nursing. Any thoughts I had of arguing with the vicar hardly constituted a sense of vocation. Do other MSEs have a double vocation - a calling from God and a sense within themselves - or do they just do what they feel is right with God's blessing?

Again, I acknowledge I was not part of the Reflective Day and may have misunderstood but there is another consideration that could be pursued, even if not here, that pertains to all Christians in Secular Ministry for their ministry which sometimes needs more recognition and support than those to whom the Church of England has given a formal nod. There may be no sense of a call to it.

I had a career within the NHS in a number of different contexts. I have been immersed in MSE arguments, delights and obfuscations. I have a deep sense of gratitude for the way things turned out and an absolute belief that a ministry in secular employment is one of the most privileged - and difficult at times - forms of ministry there can be. It has given me a growing interest and delight in theology and theologies and a certainty that each of us can follow our hearts and our heads and find ourselves in ministry. If vocation (from Latin vocatio - 'a call, summons') is an occupation to which a person is drawn or for which they are suited, trained or qualified then I'm with that.

Thank you, Gill and Rob for making me think and wonder.

How can a camel pass through the eye of a needle? - Julian E. Blakemore

CHRISM Theology Discussion Group 20th May 2021

Introduction

Over the years, Christian attitudes to wealth and those who create it has been ambivalent at best. Throughout the Church's history, it has been quick to cast aspersions about the rich whilst at the same time relying on wealthy benefactors to fund its mission and ministry. Wealth is a taboo subject that makes people feel uncomfortable and guilty, either for having it or for wanting more of it. Wealth is also a relative term which makes it difficult to pin down. Whether the average person feels that they're wealthy depends on who they're comparing themselves with. Compared with Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk, they wouldn't feel wealthy but compared with the 689 million people around the world that the World Bank Group estimates are living on less than $1.90 a day (Source: Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020, p.56), they'd probably have to admit they are!

The power of wealth to corrupt is an ever-present danger but much less publicised has been its potential to relieve suffering and want, or how the process of creating it can provide meaning and purpose in life. For many Christians these days, it seems that all those engaged in the process of wealth creation, be they inventors, investors, entrepreneurs, business leaders, financiers, lawyers, accountants, managers, and employees who contribute to the production and sale of goods and services, and all those who support this activity by providing government, oversight, care, education, protection,

entertainment and all manner of ancillary services that maintain the fabric of society, are somehow doing something ungodly. Being part of the economic system that supports wealth generation can be seen as a necessary evil that detracts from their Christian vocation rather than being an essential part of it. We see it in the lack of prayers that are offered for those involved in business and commerce, which makes them feel that their work is outside God's Kingdom and divorced from their faith rather than a sharing in God's creative activity and a way of bringing his purposes to fulfilment.

So, we come to the fundamental question: is the creation, accumulation and possession of wealth inherently bad, or does it depend on the attitude of those engaged in it?

Old Testament and historical context

Briefly, the OT view of the materialistic world is that it was created by and belonged to God, that it was intrinsically good, fruitful, and ordered, and that it provided for the wellbeing,

livelihood, pleasure and recreation of those who lived in it and depended on it. It was entrusted to humanity to be enjoyed and used to enable them to thrive alongside the rest of creation. The capacity to produce, develop and innovate is part of what it means to be made in God's image and share in God's creativity. Wealth is a divine blessing. However, this idealised view of Creation and prosperity is predicated on people maintaining a healthy respect towards God, towards each other and towards the rest of God's creation. After the Fall, the original balance was lost. The Mosaic law showed remarkable perception for its time in its concern to protect the weaker members of society. It contained rules to prevent the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few: the poor and needy were to be supported; interest wasn't to be charged to those in distress; financial obligations weren't to last forever - every seventh year the land was to lie fallow and its harvest was to be given to the poor; every fiftieth year, all debts were to be cancelled, certain slaves released, and any land that had changed hands returned to its original owners. There is, however, little evidence that the jubilee provisions were widely observed and by the 8th century BC, a gulf had opened up between rich and poor amongst God's people. The state of affairs that had been allowed to develop where the rich were able to get richer at the expense of the poor, and where injustice, exploitation and oppression were accepted as the norm, was condemned by the major prophets as never having been God's intention for his people.

The relationship between rich and poor in First Century Palestine is further coloured by the concept of 'limited good' which was prevalent in the Ancient World. This assumed that the things people desired in life, such as land and wealth (but also including all other 'good things' like health, friendship, honour, power and influence), were limited in amount so that there was only so much to go around. A 'good' could be sub-divided but the overall amount could not be increased. As such, there was a fixed pot of wealth and any affluence enjoyed by one person inevitably came at the expense of someone

else. For this reason, the poor in society were distrustful of the wealthy for having somehow taken more than their due out of the pot and keeping them in poverty. This also fuelled the issues of patronage and of honour and shame, as the wealthy sought to deflect criticism by cultivating a number of dependants, who, in turn, sought to curry favour with the wealthy for the benefits such an association might bring. Honour and reputation determined the position of a family and its members in society and financial resources were a significant factor in this. Becoming poor resulted in loss of

honour and once lost, it was very difficult to regain. For the many living at the margin of subsistence, it did not take much to drive them into the hands of exploitative patron creditors and set them on the path towards debt servitude, or loss of land that turned them into day labourers or beggars. There was no benefit system for them to fall back on. Descending into poverty not only inflicted economic hardship but was a source of shame and disgrace which led to victims being shunned from society.

In Jesus' day, Palestine was part of the Roman Empire, having been conquered in 63 BC. Whilst some Jews acquiesced with Roman control and profited from it, most bitterly resented it and especially the requirement to pay tributes to the Emperor. Apart from this political discontent, social and economic inequalities were also present in Judea, as in every part of the Empire, particularly as a result of changes to traditional land ownership that took place during the reign of vassal king, Herod the Great (37 BC to 4 AD). A small ruling elite amassed large estates from which they were able to derive a comfortable living. They inhabited small cities, whilst the majority of the population lived in the surrounding villages and countryside. The cities depended on the labour of the surrounding villages for their food and wealth. The economic tensions and social unrest that this situation gave rise to is demonstrated by the prevalence of banditry throughout Galilee as attested by Josephus (37-c.100 AD), who mentions more than a dozen of these rebel bandits including Judas the Galilean and the Egyptian. Banditry also provides the backdrop for Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Similarly, the existence of social division and the animosity this

fuelled is implied in Jesus' parables about the rebellious tenants who try to seize the absentee landlord's property (Mk 12:1-9; Mt 21:33-41; Lk 20:9-16), and in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31).

This provides a brief overview of the socioeconomic backdrop to Christ's ministry and New Testament teaching on wealth, which is where my focus lies. Jesus spoke a lot about wealth, money, and possessions so it is important to consider how some of the things he said help shape Christian attitudes to wealth and our involvement in processes of wealth creation.

Discussion questions:

- *If the Old Testament regards wealth as a divine blessing, does that make poverty a divine punishment?*
- *How can the original balance of creation be restored?*
- *Does the concept of 'limited good' have any relevance for us today given the global economy's reliance on fossil fuels and other non-renewable resources?*
- *To what extent is it possible for people to create wealth?*

The parable of the rich young man

The familiar story of Jesus' encounter with the rich young man gives rise to the question that frames this discussion.

16 Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" 17 And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." 18 He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not

commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; [19] Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself." [20] The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" [21] Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." [22] When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

[23] Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. [24] Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." [25] When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" [26] But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

Matthew 19.16-26 (NRSV)

(cf. Mark 10.17-27; Luke 18.18-27)

The story appears in all three synoptic gospels. There are small differences between Matthew, Mark and Luke but the

general thrust of their accounts is the same. I'll concentrate on St. Matthew's version and reflect briefly on the significance of what passes between Jesus and the rich young man to see what it has to say about the problem of wealth.

The man confronts Jesus and asks him, "what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" He is not identified as young or rich until later in the passage but we can assume that these facts would have been obvious to those who were there. The man's question suggests he is looking for confirmation, perhaps more in hope than expectation, that eternal life is something that he can earn (or buy?) through some specific heroic act, or single grand gesture.

Jesus reminds the young man that when it comes to goodness, there is only one who is good and that is God alone. Jesus says that a good place to start is by keeping the commandments. In saying this, Jesus wasn't telling the man anything he shouldn't have already known as a practising Jew. It would be a gross oversimplification for the man to think that there's one single thing he could do to gain life - there is all manner of good that God might require of someone and what's really important is persistent obedience to a number of commandments that embrace a person's duty to God and to their neighbour.

The man is keen to know which of the commandments Jesus is referring to. This is telling because it suggests not only that the man thinks some are more important than others but also that there are some, maybe one in particular, he knows he's failed to keep.

Jesus uses an abbreviated list of commandments – you shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, and you

shall honour your parents – but then, reflecting his own emphasis on love, adds the rider "love your neighbour as yourself." It is, however, also interesting that Jesus chooses not to refer specifically to having no other gods and not coveting.

Without a second thought and in a way that smacks of pride and self-righteousness, the young man claims to have observed all of the specific commandments listed by Jesus and continues to press him, "What do I still lack?"

It's at this point that Matthew departs most strikingly from Mark and Luke. Whereas they have Jesus playing back the man's own words, as in Luke "One thing still you lack," Matthew's rendering has Jesus setting what the man must do in the context of him achieving perfection. "If you wish to be perfect," says Jesus, "go, sell your possessions, give the money to the poor… and then, come, follow me."

Much has been made of Jesus' expectation of perfection but I don't think this is the most unique or important aspect of this encounter. My contention is that all are called to be 'perfect.' The same demand is made of everyone, there is no distinction. This is reinforced by Jesus' words in his Sermon on the Mount when he says, "be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect (Matt. 5.48). What is unusual here is the conditional nature of Jesus' invitation to the man to follow him. He sets the man a challenge that is both unequivocal and uncompromising – to follow Jesus, he must first sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. In practice, Jesus' call of this individual involves no more sacrifice than when he called four fishermen, Peter and Andrew, James and John, to leave their nets and

abandon their livelihoods in order to follow him. The only difference is that with them the cost was implicit; with him it's explicit. Faced with this choice, the man realises he can't bear to be parted from his possessions and goes away grieving.

Reflecting with his disciples on the events that have unfolded before them, Jesus goes on to make some wider points about the dangers of wealth and how hard it is for someone who's rich to enter the Kingdom of God: "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle." The absurdity of this image makes the degree of difficulty very clear to everyone. Naturally, the disciples are concerned by this and ask, "then who can be saved?"

Jesus doesn't say that it's *impossible* for a rich person to enter God's kingdom but makes it very clear that they won't be able to do it by themselves. He points to reliance on God's grace as the only way which is open: "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." This implies that as a result of God's love and power, no one is beyond the pale, that even a rich person can be saved.

Discussion questions:

- *Is Jesus against wealth per se or is it something about the man's attitude to it that's the issue?*
- *Is Jesus' challenge specific to this man and his circumstances, or does it have wider implications?*
- *Is Jesus setting a higher standard – a counsel of perfection – for some followers that doesn't apply to all?*
- *Do you have to become poor to follow Jesus?*

Other sayings of Jesus

The church has long wrestled with these questions. Now let me broaden the scope of our considerations from this specific encounter with the rich young man to other aspects of Jesus' teaching on wealth.

1st century Judea wasn't a hub for multi-national corporations, investment bankers, asset management, or for trading in stocks and shares, bonds, derivatives, foreign exchange, commodities, or cryptocurrencies. Jesus didn't spend his earthly ministry advocating socio-economic policies or setting out a governance framework that could underpin the modern financial marketplace. However, he would have been familiar with some large-scale commercial operations. He would also have been aware of how some used pretty underhand business practices to make fortunes. Greed, fraud, extortion, and unfairness were a blot on society then as they are now.

Tax collecting was big business at the time. There wasn't a central agency like HMRC to collect people's dues. As an imperial province of Rome, Judea paid taxes direct to the imperial treasury. As we know, the Jewish people bitterly resented having to pay taxes to Rome so, with the cynical

pragmatism that was their wont, the Romans left it to the Jewish leaders to collect taxes from the people on their behalf. The privilege of 'farming' taxes was auctioned annually for each city or region in the country. Since a lot of capital was required to purchase these rights (up to 20% of revenues had to be paid upfront), syndicates or cartels were formed to provide the necessary financial backing. A successful bidder would then have virtually free licence to raise taxes for any amount and in any way they liked and, of course, looked to make as big a profit as possible. Tax collecting was a source of considerable wealth for a significant minority.

Jesus never condemns wealth as such. However, he does offer counsel about the risks it entails and the bad behaviours it can lead to that threaten a person's spiritual wellbeing - covetousness, greed, selfishness and materialism, of love of money replacing love of God. Generally, apart from overturning the money-changers tables in the temple at Jerusalem (Matt. 21.12-17; Mk. 11.15-19; Lk. 19.45-48; cf. Jn. 2.13-22), he is more concerned with individuals and their motives than overtly trying to overthrow economic systems. However, he preaches about the fulfilment of God's kingdom on earth based on love of God and neighbour. There's no ignoring the fact that this is a radical message that is intended to transform the world and the way that human systems operate but his was/is a 'quiet revolution.' Whilst Jesus seems to accept the existence of money as a useful tool for doing business, and the fact that some have more than others, he stresses the need for people to keep money and wealth in its rightful place and not let it take over their lives. He is against those who sell their souls to mammon and idolise money and

possessions. He calls people to turn to God in love and to live their lives in a way that is befitting of children of God.

Jesus didn't eschew worldly affairs and, rather than disowning wealthy individuals who earned their living in a disreputable way, he openly engaged with them. For him, it's all about the people: their attitudes and motivations towards money and wealth, the manner in which they acquire it and what they do with it when they've got it. Do they see what they do in the context of God's kingdom? Do they look out for the poor? Are they displaying the love of God and of their neighbour in all their dealings?

We might add to this: do their behaviours reflect the fruit of the spirit? In their handling of money and in financial transactions, are they respectful, honest, fair, straightforward, responsible, ethical, environmentally friendly and community-spirited?

We can clearly see where Jesus places his emphasis from the following:

(i) Engaging with those making money through worldly activities

- Jesus associated with tax collectors:
    - He called Matthew (or Levi), a tax collector, to be one of his chosen followers (Matt. 9.9-13; Mk. 2.13-14; Lk. 5.27-28).
    - He dined with a 'large crowd' of tax collectors and when challenged by the scribes and Pharisees about the company he was keeping,

Jesus told them that "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." He accepts that the tax collectors have their faults but neither are they hopeless cases (Matt. 9.15-17; Mk. 2.14-17; Lk. 5.29-32).

- He befriended another tax collector, Zacchaeus, who was rich and lost. Zacchaeus volunteers to give half of his possessions to the poor and if he has cheated anyone out of anything, to repay them four times over. This restitution went far beyond what the law of Moses required. Jesus declares that "Today salvation has come to this house" (Lk. 19.1-10). It's interesting that Jesus doesn't insist on him selling all his possessions on this occasion.
- He accepted paying taxes to the Romans but was also concerned to ensure that people paid their dues to God, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22.21)
- In the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector, Jesus praises the tax collector who admonishes himself before God as a sinner (Lk. 19.9-14).

- In the parable of the talents, Jesus refers to bankers and interest without any suggestion of disapproval. The master in the story is depicted as an entrepreneur, a harsh man, who reaps where he has not sown and

gathers where he has not scattered seed. The servants who show similar enterprise and make returns on the talents they were given are praised. The one who buried his talent in the ground is told that he should have put it on deposit with the bankers so he would have received it back with interest (Matt. 25.14-30).

(ii) Warnings about cares and riches

- Jesus warned about the dangers of becoming caught-up with the cares and riches of this world because they impede his followers from responding to God with all their hearts.
    - In the parable of the sower, he likens the seed that is sown amongst thorns to "the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing (Matt. 13.22-23; cf. Mk. 4.18-19; Lk. 8.14).
    - In the parable of the rich fool (Lk. 12.13-21), Jesus condemns the covetousness of the rich landowner who builds bigger barns to hoard his crops for himself but is not rich towards God.
    - In the parable of the wedding feast (Matt.22.1-14; Lk. 14.15-24), those invited by the King rejected his invitation because they prioritised their business interests, possessions and other worldly cares over honouring their commitment. Angered and disappointed by their excuses, the King extends the invitation to

the least expected so it is "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" who become the guests at the banquet.

(iii) True treasure

- In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus urges his disciples not to "store up treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matt. 6.19-21).

- He then emphasises the point by asserting that "no one 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" (Matt. 6.24).

(iv) Responsibility towards the poor

- On first reading, Jesus' saying that "the poor are always with you" (Mk. 14.7; Matt. 26.11; Jn. 12.8) can sound fatalistic. However, against a background of "limited good" and Old Testament concern for the poor, it can be seen in a different light. Far from regarding poverty as inevitable, Jesus' words clearly recall Deut. 15.7-11 (cf. Lk. 1.53 and Gal. 2.10) where the imperative is that for as long as there are poor amongst you, concern and care for the poor is a divine duty. If the poor are always present, then one is obligated to care.

- Amongst the evangelists, St. Luke is most concerned about the right use of riches and caring for the poor. This special interest in the poor reflects God's protection and care of the poor in the Old Testament.

    - Jesus announces his mission using words from the prophet Isaiah 61.1-2 "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Lk. 4:18-19).

    - The Beatitudes in St. Luke's gospel (Lk. 6.17-26) have a much harder socioeconomic edge to them than St. Matthew's more spiritualised version (Matt. 5-7). Jesus expresses a concern for those who are *literally* poor, hungry and

weeping. He pronounces God's blessing on those who are without economic means, social value or status. This is not because living in poverty makes them fortunate or that poverty is a lifestyle choice to be encouraged but because in God's kingdom the World's values are already being turned on their heads and those who are downtrodden today will be lifted up (cf. the reversal of fortunes between rich and poor in the Magnificat, Lk. 1.51-53). Unlike Matthew, Luke also includes contrasting 'woes' for the rich, well-fed and laughing. The uncompromising message to them is that they have nothing to look forward to because they have already received their consolation.

- In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16.19-31), Jesus warns against being like the rich man who was finely dressed and dined sumptuously every day whilst ignoring the plight of poor Lazarus at his gate.

- Jesus' parable about faithful and unfaithful servants (Lk. 12.41-48) ends with the warning "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded" (Lk. 12.48). The parable is not specifically about the use of wealth but more generally about servants doing their master's will. Nevertheless, the call to servants to be faithful in all their dealings at all times is as

applicable to the handing of money and possessions as anything else, as is the reminder that expectations are higher of those to whom more has been entrusted.

- In St. Matthew's gospel, Jesus describes the Last Judgement (Matt. 25.31-46). Those who are blessed are the ones who helped those in need, who fed the hungry, gave the thirsty something to drink, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and those in prison.

Jesus deals with people's hearts and minds on the basis that if they are in the right place, everything else will follow and God's kingdom will be fulfilled.

Discussion questions:

- *Is it possible to use money without serving money?*
- *Jesus was described as 'a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' What does this say to us about our attitudes to business and commerce?*
- *How realistic is it for wealthy people to enter the kingdom of heaven?*

Attitudes within the early church

The community of early believers expected the end times to come imminently, so their priority was on preparing themselves to ensure they were ready for Christ's coming in glory rather than saving for the future.

The Acts of the Apostles shows that they were committed to spreading the gospel as Jesus had commanded, through teaching, preaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer. St. Luke continues his gospel emphasis on wealth and poverty, describing how the community held all things in common, sold their possessions and gave to any in need (Acts 2.44-45; 4.32-35; 9.36; 10.2). The church, uniquely for a community group in the ancient world, drew in people from across the social and economic spectrum. Nowhere else were slaves and masters able to meet as equals! Those who prioritised money over the needs of others or who thought that they could use money to buy favour with God were condemned (Acts 5.1-11; 8.14-24).

Like Jesus, the nascent church prioritised people and their spiritual wellbeing over money and possessions. Money and possessions were used in the service of Christ but they had no hold over the community of believers. The pursuit of these material things was not allowed to detract from Christ as their master and focus of their activity. St. Paul echoes Jesus' sentiments in his, often misquoted, saying about "the love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Tim. 6.10). For Paul, money itself is not the problem, nor even the possession of money or wealth. These things are neutral in and of themselves. He is concerned by what money can do to people when they fall in love with it, when it becomes the centre of their affections and controls their lives. The love of money is a form of idolatry that turns people away from loving God and their neighbour. It leads them from God/Christ-inspired altruistic acts of generosity, kindness and compassion to a self-centred outlook on life, characterised by baser instincts of avarice, greed and

covetousness. It is these behaviours, the products of a misplaced love of money, that Paul condemns.

The Epistle of James provides further clear evidence of how the teaching of Jesus was received by, and used to shape, the early church. James' ethics reflect Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in the way he writes about the persecution of the Christian community by rich and powerful oppressors and points to the reversal of fortunes between rich and poor in God's kingdom (Jas. 2.1-7). Later, James warns the rich against hoarding wealth in the expectation of the coming judgement (Jas. 5.1-6). He speaks metaphorically of material possessions being corroded and debased to signify their worthlessness for the life of the world to come. His reference to gold 'rusting' (Jas. 5.3) is interesting, not only because gold does not rust, but also because gold and rust are similar in colour which maybe alludes to the attraction of wealth being misleading and deceptive.

When the Parousia did not happen as quickly as many in the early church had expected, the extended uncertainty caused community to re-think the way they engaged with the World. The rapid growth of the church, combined with the need for patient waiting and continued watchfulness, brought fresh organisational challenges. The ministry and mission of the fledgling church had to be placed on a more sustainable footing to ensure its survival. This meant planning for the future became more important, as did finding ways to support its work.

Discussion questions:

- *The early church held all things in common. Why is this not normative church practice for today?*
- *How do we avoid money matters taking over our lives?*
- *Money can be a source of power. How can we turn that power to good use?*

Final thoughts

How, then, can a rich person achieve the seemingly impossible and enter the kingdom of heaven? Clearly for Jesus, what job they do is no impediment for he associated with tax collectors and sinners. However, he does not condone unscrupulous business practices. He does not insist that everyone sells all they have in order to follow him but they cannot be solely money-motivated. He expects those who are wealthy to be responsible and show concern for those who are poor and be generous. Most important of all is Jesus' teaching on true treasure, for it is where our heart lies that provides the key to the conundrum.

Wealth is not bad in itself, it is what people do with their money that matters. In the parable of the talents, those who put their talents to use and take risks are praised whilst the one who buried theirs to keep it safe was criticised. In his sermon on *The Use of Money*, John Wesley urged Methodists to "*Earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can."* He wasn't opposed to people having money, nor did he think that money was evil. What mattered most was what people did with their money. For Wesley, "money is an excellent gift of

God, answering the noblest ends. In the hands of his children it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked." Used in the right way, money and wealth can be a positive force for good.

We have seen wealth inequalities increasing, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Business, commerce and trade provide jobs and livelihoods and generate wealth for individuals and communities. For those who become wealthy, how they make their money is important, as is how they use it – what they spend it on, what they save, and what they give away to those in need. Whilst the idea of 'limited good' no longer holds sway, neither is the creation of wealth completely unlimited. Some things that have been used to create wealth, such as fossil fuels and mineral resources, are clearly finite. Furthermore, their ruthless extraction and consumption is destroying the planet we live on. If we love material things, we will be swept away by the tide of consumerism that is causing such irreparable damage. A different perspective is required, a new set of priorities. Wealth needs to be seen not as an end in itself but as a means to an end – something that has to be handled responsibly and, if it is, can be used to help make the World a better place. When we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbour as ourselves, wealth becomes subservient.

When the rich young man approaches Jesus and starts asking questions, Jesus would have wondered where his true loyalties lay? It's hard to know if the man's motives are pure or self-serving – is he genuinely looking to please God or to look after himself? For me, it's not that the man is rich that stops him following Jesus but his self-reliance. The emphasis in what

he says is on what he can do for himself rather than what God can do for him. His was a self-reliance born of great wealth and privilege. The hold his wealth has over him, the trust he places in it and the pre-eminent place it occupies in his affections is clear. He has everything he needs in this life and it could be that he's now seeking to make sure he's well-placed for the life to come as well. Jesus tests him to find out whether he loves God more than he loves being wealthy. In the final analysis, his possessions mean more to him than the attainment of eternal life which he professed to be seeking.

It's for this reason that the man went away grieving: not because he was wealthy but because his wealth was the most important thing to him. And it's because materialism can penetrate our hearts and exert such a powerful influence over us that Jesus warns his disciples of its dangers. The wealthy, who are used to buying their privileges, can find it particularly hard to enter the Kingdom of God: "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle."

What the man needed was a change of heart. What's impossible to human beings is possible to God. It's all about where people's priorities lie and where (in whom) they choose to place their trust. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4.6).

Taxes – a Christian perspective: Rob Fox

Having worked in taxation for more years than I care to remember, I've long had a keen interest in the Christian perspectives on the subject and am always looking for fresh contributions. Back in 1990 (when I was training on the Northern Ordination Course) the then Bishop of Manchester, Stanley Booth-Clibborn, published "Taxes: Burden or Blessing?", a survey of the main Christian thinking on taxes. Very much in the tradition of the William Temple Foundation, he concluded that taxes are largely a blessing, a public good, subject to how the burden falls on those who pay them and how wisely the proceeds are used. Knowing I worked in tax, Bishop Stanley gave me an advance copy, which I re-read periodically.

I recently came across the work of the late Dutch Christian philosopher, Herman Dooyeweerd, which struck me as having much to say on how we can look at taxes with the eye of faith. Over the past 20 years there has been increased attention to

and public disapproval of tax avoidance. (Interestingly, while on secondment to the States of Jersey – implementing a new tax there! – I could see from my desk into the office across the road, which was a firm later to be notorious as source of the 'Panama Papers', which revealed considerable corporate tax avoidance). The way in which Dooyeweerd approached the concept of public good is, I think, a useful tool to apply to taxation in general and avoidance in particular.

Dooyeweerd identified fifteen aspects of reality, related but distinct from each other (for a full account of these see Aspects of Reality - The Dooyeweerd Pages). Each of them makes things meaningful in a different way, and provides a perspective from which to view issues or situations. Each offers a different notion of what is good and normative. Dooyeweerd's aspects do not primarily give us answers, but they open up areas for discussion and help us disentangle complex issues, such as the role and application of taxation.

Five of the aspects in particular appear relevant to addressing questions around taxation: the economic, juridical, ethical and faith aspects. From the economic aspect, the main good is frugality. This might suggest that it is good to steward wealth and avoid taxes if governments would waste it. But, to Dooyeweerd, the economic aspect is not absolute and does not stand alone. Four other aspects come after it and give it fuller meaning. For example, the aesthetic aspect, which is important for art and poetry, and which depends on the economic idea of frugality for elegance. Arguably, the aesthetic aspect is of less importance than the other three, which give the economic aspect a relatively stronger meaning.

From the perspective of the juridical aspect, the main good is justice, both due and proportionate . Society's idea of what is just is expressed in its laws. So, if citizens keep the law, they help to build a society that is consistent with its idea of justice. Some argue that tax avoidance is acceptable as long as it is within the law. In my experience the line between tax avoidance and tax evasion is blurred at best; turning a blind eye or stretching the law beyond what was intended can be as unjust as actively participating in evasion. To Dooyeweerd, though, this is not enough, where a society tries to rely on law alone, without reference to other aspects, laws become more complex over time and accumulate a multitude of loopholes, which the unscrupulous. This is the case with most forms of taxation in the UK, and particularly Income and Corporation Tax (the latter is one of the longest and most complex tax codes in the world).

To tackle the exploitation of complexity and loopholes, we need the two final aspects.

The first of these is the ethical aspect, the main good of which is self-giving love. Its opposite, selfishness, self-centredness,

self-protection, is harmful to others, both individually and corporately. However selfishness is the attitude that pervades society. While some argue that tax avoidance in the form of tax breaks can be used for the good of others (such as the UK's Gift-Aid scheme), if undertaken primarily with a selfish attitude it is difficult to distinguish this from other forms of tax avoidance. A right thing done with a wrong attitude is still harmful.

From the faith aspect, the main good is life-vision, commitment and openness to God. This is the underpinning aspect, giving full meaning to all the others. The faith aspect is not primarily about religious creeds, but about what we take to be most meaningful in life. Contemporary capitalist, competitive, society sees production, wealth and the individual person or business as meaningful, and all else must be subservient to those. Under that life-vision, tax avoidance is to be expected and seen as normative. But by this the economic aspect is placed above all others. Taking religion as the sphere of life in which ultimate meaningfulness is considered, Jesus gave the

challenge, "What does it benefit someone to gain the whole world and lose their life?" (Mark 8:36). He made it clear that in God's eyes wealth is ultimately of little importance. He also repeatedly challenged those who would follow God's way to give generously (cf. the rich young man, Matthew 19:16ff). In this context attitude is not just personal, but that of the whole society.

The vision of reality Jesus set out implies that tax-avoidance is driven by a false, selfish, vision of reality. He urged his followers to avoid making wealth their aim and trust their Heavenly Father to supply their need even before they are aware of it themselves ("Consider the lilies of the field …." Matthew 6:28ff).

Dooyeweerd's three final aspects are structural aspects: both individual and societal in their scope. The juridical aspect concerns the laws and norms that structure public affairs. The ethical aspect speaks of the attitude that underpins society and influences all we think, say or do. The faith aspect concerns the hidden assumptions and presuppositions held by society about what is ultimately meaningful, and which define how public discourse is conducted.

If the debate about tax avoidance is limited to the individual person or business, it is narrow, misleading and ultimately harmful. The debate must take into account the ethical and faith aspects too.

The weakness of much right-wing thinking is to ignore the structural element and privatise the ethical and faith aspects. The fault of left-wing thinking is often to ignore the ethical and faith aspects altogether and seek redress only by law.

If we seriously hope to end tax avoidance (and reduce evasion), not only do we need to make our tax codes simpler to comply with and harder to worm around, but work to build a society in which ethics and faith underpin what we do and how we do it.

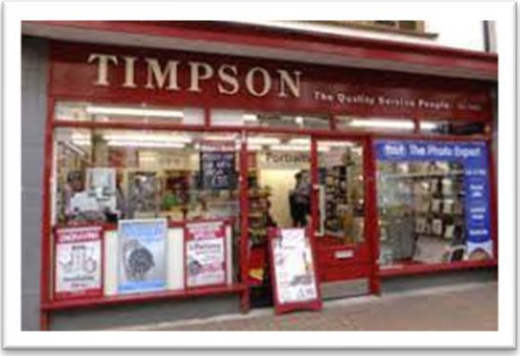
Are you a "success"? – Eric Knowles

Originally written for a local choir newsletter and therefore has local references: Revd Canon Eric G. Knowles is Regional Chaplain (Wales & West Region) RAF AC

"No, don't try to answer that question unless you can explain how you measure it." The Malvern Singers Standing Committee recently circulated a questionnaire as part of preparation for getting together again (or not). You've all been through a pretty rough time since the beginning of 2020 and like so many other organisations there is a question over whether the choir should start-up again and how it might choose to do so. "No, I'm definitely not going to offer any kind of advice on that!" and "Yes, I am a coward ~ hospital food is good but not that good". But part of such a debate is about what an organisation is trying to achieve and whether it seems to be managing to do that.

I've been reading what James Timpson says about his organisation. His current difficulty, as for so many companies, is not about starting-up, but about keeping going. The Timpson Company has a very interesting history, and a refreshing approach to its staff as people. Timpson doesn't talk about "employees" but about "colleagues". One of the major streams of the business is shoe repairs and key cutting. It's a multi-national organisation with 5,400 members, so it's worth listening to James Timpson. He believes that how colleagues feel affects the way that customers feel. That, in turn, has a direct impact on the business. When the choir sings at a

concert it is sometimes noticeable that it has really enjoyed singing a particular song and that has been reflected in the applause.



In the hospitality industry the debate is definitely about whether starting-up again is viable. About 30% of Pubs and restaurants are doubtful. The purpose of the companies is more easily defined and measured. The decision will be based upon financial viability. For groups such as choirs, churches and youth organisations like Scouts and my own ~ RAF Air Cadets, the assessment measurements are not so easy. Yes, we can play the numbers game. How many do this? And how many do that? I run my own Facebook page and it would be easy to assess its "success" on the basis of numbers. But is that a true measure of viability in all instances?

As a Methodist Local Preacher I would visit lots of little country chapels. Many of them now have changed from being spiritual homes to be family homes. Take for example the one at Pendock which was attended by two elderly ladies, one of whom played the organ. That has been converted into a family home. We measured its place in society by the number of people who attended it. Was that the right basis on which to decide its future? If that were the full definition of its purpose then many more such places should be closed. There used to be a Methodist chapel in West Malvern. That too has been "converted". One of its members was a

Welshman who owned the local bakery. His comment about a sermon was "If it only spoke to one person then it was worthwhile". Are there times when this is an aspect we should seriously consider?

Timpson has just started a survey across the Company. He sent out a questionnaire with just one question on it; "On a scale of 1 – 10, how happy are you with the support you get from your management team?" It was sent out to 4,000 colleagues through the post because he gets a much better response than sending it out electronically. Timpson doesn't ignore collecting weekly statistics on sales and profits but he does carry out an annual survey of the managers' "happy index". He says, "People may think we are mad having this focus on happiness. But here's the thing: we find that the better the happy index score, the more profit we make."

Between 2016 and 2020 The University of Nottingham carried out research into the "Social impact and the Return on Investment from Expenditure on Cadet Forces in the UK". The research was commissioned by the MoD. Naturally the MoD wanted to check on what was happening to taxpayers' money it was spending on cadets. It was refreshing to see that the University was asked not only to look at the financial returns but the social impact as well. What

they found was that there were significant gains made by the cadets in Communication, Leadership, Resilience, Social skills and Confidence. The measurements of financial benefits showed significant gains in all sorts of areas including for instance reduced cost in treatment of mental health of young people. The report is 62 pages long so I am only giving you a flavour of it. If you want to know more then I'm happy to provide you with an electronic copy.

Like Timpson, the financial results were measured and not ignored but the "soft" impact was also assessed. Yes, we can look at our own lives and think about how we spend our time and we can measure our "success". Is it by the car we drive, the house we own and the salary we earn, or are there other aspects that we have found to be important? One of the results of the coronavirus has been the assessments people have carried out on their lives. There has been a significant increase in people giving serious consideration to their lifestyle. In the past, the standard measure of our desire for a job has been the salary offered and the pension provided at the end. Now though, people are thinking about the impact on the way they live, how it affects the family and their time with their friends. They have started to consider the effect of their work on society and on the environment.

Funerals are noted for end of life reviews, their assessments of successes and failures.

Here are some words from a poem sometimes read at a funeral, when a life is being reviewed:

"Not, how did he die, but how did he live?
Not, what did he gain, but what did he give?
These are the units to measure the worth
Of a man as a man, regardless of birth."

Eternal Life – a theology! – Ruth Brothwell

I had volunteered to lead the Theology Discussion Group on 'Eternal Life'. It was a subject that had been bugging me for some time and I longed to simply discuss it in a safe place with fellow thinkers. Then, my sister fell seriously ill. She was admitted in a rush to hospital and placed in a coma. Covid we thought!!!! But no….all the consultants said no – but kept her in a coma while they looked for and treated heart and lung conditions. She was 'down' for 9 days and couldn't believe it when she came round. She had received a vivid 'near death experience' and it has changed my own perceptions but confirmed many also which our session just added too.

It was impossible to actually 'do' a theology of this huge subject in a single evening. The aim instead was to provide some food for thought. To enable us as MSEs to have a think about a subject, which, for me speaking personally, was the largest I had to address with my fellow colleagues. They simply couldn't believe it. So, I ask….do you??

To start with - some things others have said:

Twelve years ago, popular author Dan Brown published a book – bought and read by many of his fans – in which he said:

"We have been born into wonderful times.

A change is coming. Human beings are poised on the threshold of a new age when they will begin turning their eyes back to nature and to the old ways…back to the ideas in books like the Zohar and other ancient texts from around the world. Powerful truth has its own gravity and eventually pulls people back to it. There will come a day when modern science begins in earnest to study the wisdom of

the ancients…that will be the day that mankind begins to find answers to the big questions that still elude him."

Also: "we have barely scratched the surface of our mental and spiritual capabilities."

Primo Levi, an Italian Jewish chemist, Holocaust survivor and writer. wrote:

Fellow humans, …listen...20 billion years before now…there was a ball of flame, solitary, eternal….it exploded and every change began... From that one spasm everything was born; the same abyss which enfolds and challenges us, the same *time* that spawns and defeats us, everything anyone has ever thought….

Richard Holloway, retired Bishop of the Scottish Episcopal church writes:

"The elements of which our bodies were formed, which made our evolution possible were a consequence of all that grinding violence…They did not exist until the universe reached a single point in its expansion when the clouds of hydrogen and helium it released were cool enough to condense into the galaxies that formed the first stars. Our earth is a fragment of stardust about five billion years old formed from the reverberations of one of those explosions. It orbits the suburbs of a small galaxy in a universe of billions of galaxies.

We know that our universe may contain 140 billion galaxies. Someone has said that if galaxies were frozen peas there would be enough to fill the Albert Hall."

Someone else very ancient said:

"Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon

the earth. And it was so. God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night and the stars….and God saw that it was good."

Without a doubt, as I have said, this whole idea of 'eternity' – of 'whether God' – of the promise of something else – other – eternal life - is the biggest issue that is raised with me as an MSE by those people I encounter.

People who might be 'well read' – who read and listen to the words of our modern age – people who believe, that I believe, in **life eternal** and people who feel that they cannot so believe. This is

their blockage to Christianity and they want to address it with **me**.

Everyone has a story of someone they know who has had a 'near death' experience and they are keen to recount it. For many it has become an article of their faith and certainly the centre of their life's ambitions.

So, what do I answer them? What do I discuss with them? And am I sure of my own theology?

I think it is fair to say that our Eternal Life theology is rooted in our New Testament. When much of the new Testament was being written the Rabbis and Pharisees were based at Jamnia on the west

cost of Israel and issuing their teachings from there to a Jewish nation, then in diaspora.

Paul's letters to the new churches at Corinth, Galatia and Rome are all said to be written from around 40 – 54 AD. Therefore, Paul's thought emanates from what Judaism was saying at that time and combatting **that** teaching. Not the issues coming out of the Pharisees at Jamnia. That was after the great Jewish war, later on, much of which may be reflected in our Gospels. Although Mark may be as early as the fifties and Matthew and Luke might have called upon his work. John is very much later. And John's Gospel contains a good deal about eternal life that we might quote from. But let's just remember that John is a mystic and writes about knowledge, gnosis and all things such as that. We must not take odd verses out of context of the whole of his thinking.

All the synoptic gospels used the 'sayings source' said to be earlier material and so that is very relevant to our thinking.

We have to be careful when we talk about our theology - our belief systems if you will – and on what it is actually based.

It is important for us to know that there was and is no actual <u>Jewish belief</u> in 'eternal life' as we have come to think about it today. Jesus, as a good Jew, did not develop a new belief but rather said he came to fulfill the beliefs already held.

Judaism still looked for and anticipated **'the day of the Lord'** – the Messianic promise that a saviour would come to save all of Israel. It's the Tannaitic literature, those writings of the Rabbis, that tell us much about the teachings that were going on in the day.

'The Day of the Lord' - or the Judgment Day – **was** the Messianic Age of which much is spoken of in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament.

In Paul's writings to the new Christian churches there is still very much a belief in good Jewish theology - but what he was trying to put forward, as an alternative, was Christ – **that Christ had come as their long-awaited Messiah**.

When we come to Jesus – and what we are told he said - we need to get behind the words of the Gospels to that 'saying source' which is closer to the actual time that Jesus walked the earth. This would then take us to Mark – the earliest Gospel who uses a large amount of the original sayings.

So, in considering the subject and the theology of 'eternal life' let's not forget what was going on at the time of the writing of our New Testament if that is what we are basing our theology upon.

As an example, consider this from the Tannaitic literature – A Rabbi says: "if Adam's single transgression of a negative commandment led to death for subsequent generations how much more will a man's action of repenting and fasting on the Day of Atonement benefit him and his descendants……"

Now where have we heard similar to that? I give you Paul – in Romans 5: 2

"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin…even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come."

So, Paul was happy to use Jewish thinking as his starting point.

Now – today - in terms of what is being thought about in these days let us consider that during lockdown the BBC taught the GCSE Religious syllabus online on this subject. It reads as follows:

"When the early Jewish scriptures were written, many Jews believed that on death, all people would descend to a dark place called Sheol. As Jews

came into contact with other influences, further teachings developed. Sheol then became a place of purification, or waiting…Later teachings about life after death included the idea that judgement would happen after the coming of the Messiah.…There would then be punishment or reward for the way they had lived, ***but there was no clear teaching on the exact nature of Heaven or Hell."***

So, our young people are being taught that what is important is how a person lives their lives. Good deeds should be done for their own sake. To quote: *There would then be punishment or reward for the way they had lived.*

But – **we** have the Nicene Creed which we repeat each Sunday:

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

SO: Where do we get it from? This view which is perhaps passed on to us in 19th century form, from our old aunts and uncles. What is it we actually believe? What are we supposed to believe and why?

When Paul wrote to Philemon he said:

"…our commonwealth is in heaven and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body..."

The theology of Paul's beliefs and teachings on the world to come is huge and too much for one evening's Theology Discussion Group. But it's there throughout all his works - some would say at their very heart. He seems to have fully believed that the old Jewish way of believing in the world to come attained through the works of sacrifices and attending the festivals has now been completed through Christ.

But still there is no real belief in 'going to heaven when you die'. Or 'everlasting life'. It is still all about 'the Day of the Lord' now attainable through faith in Christ.

So, what is that? Where has all this other stuff come from – this 'Aunty is looking down upon us….' This – 'being united with my beloved husband again….'

As ministers, many of us take funerals and hear these words on the lips of the bereaved. As I have said, in my own work as MSE the whole subject of 'eternal life' has probably been the biggest one I have encountered from those folk, who do not darken the porches of our churches, and yet look to **us**, MSEs, for comfort and pastoral care in the place where they are.

What do we say?

What do we say at work?

What do we say to the bereaved?

Perhaps we cannot answer all the tough theological questions. Perhaps we should at least start thinking about them. We should be sure we continue to have them at the forefront of our minds so that we can hold conversations with others which are full of integrity.

We asked ourselves some questions. 'what is it that YOU actually believe and why? What do you base it on? A verse of scripture? The teaching of someone you've heard?

Someone recommended me a book written by a neurosurgeon*[1] which also explored this subject from a secular doctor's point of view. It's great and has led me to others in a similar vein. I recommend them……

So, what are people saying to you? Is my experience yours? Is this a concern to the people you work and live among?

Ruth Brothwell is a local Councillor and former Moderator of CHRISM

CHRISM Theology Discussion Group

The CHRISM Theology Discussion Group was launched in September 2020 in response to an identified need amongst CHRISM members for an online forum to reflect on and discuss theological aspects of work and ministry in the world of work.

The Group is open to all CHRISM members and meets monthly by Zoom for an hour and a half. The Group is currently 42 strong, with an average attendance at meetings of around 15. Discussions are generally led by members of the Group.

Discussion topics have included:

- The Importance of our Work to God and Us
- The Idea of Rest
- What is Work?

[1] *'Proof of Heaven' by Dr Eben Alexander 2012 Piatkus

- Justice at Work
- The Kingdom at Work Project
- Eternal Life a theology!
- Christian perspectives on conflict in the workplace
- How can a camel pass through the eye of a needle? Jesus' teaching on wealth
- Organisational values – help or hindrance to ministry in the workplace?

Our next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, 22 September 2021 from 19.30-21.00. If you are interested in joining this group and would like to be added to the invitation list and receive Zoom links for the next and future meetings, please email rev.julian.e.blakemore@gmail.com for details.

We look forward to welcoming you.

Revd Julian Blakemore

Mentors

Do you feel on your own in your situation / job / diocese? Do you think you might benefit from connecting with a mentor? Or have your experiences as an MSE given you a wealth of insights which might support someone else newer to the role? If you fit either of these and would be interested to look at opportunities for informal mentoring, please get in touch with a committee member, and we will get you connected!

Forthcoming Events

International Conference of European Worker Priests, 3rd – 5th September 2021: Phil Aspinall

Looking optimistically to the ending of the domination of Corona virus in Europe and globally the coordinating group have decided to go ahead with the International Meeting of Worker Priests over the weekend of the 3rd – 5th September. The venue will be the Nell Breuning Haus conference centre in Herzogenrath on the frontier of Germany and the Netherlands near to Aachen.

The intention is to recover the themes of the conference lost from last year, touching on Corona, but also looking at other developments…

The emergence of new social movements in our countries in the face of Covid 19. What are the consequences in my life ?

During our discussions it has been noted that in these times, and throughout Europe, there are movements, both newly-formed and "traditional", that are arising in response to Covid, for example in Unions, working class movements and among migrants and refugees. We had the impression that everyone in their own way is affected or involved, and that this theme would give a good basis for our meeting.

The participants had already prepared discussion papers last year (see *Ministers at Work*, issue 155, October 2020). But we are invited to add any further thoughts and circulate these by the 1st August.

Last year, Ramiro, from Barcelona, had circulated a short questionnaire to aid our analysis of the pandemic:

1. Describe the principal problems which affect your country or region from the point of view of work, and especially concerning the repercussions of the pandemic on factories, the work of women, commercial businesses, the self-employed, the poorest, migrants etc. …..
2. Emphasise how people in your country or region are living with the risk of loss of paid work. Are people being more or less passive, or are they taking important initiatives, by pressing political parties, social movements, unions and across networks ?
3. From the perspective of the population, how have the social movements responded to this current situation ?
4. What has your group of Worker Priests, or Christian groups involved in the world of work, done in the face of this challenge ?
5. How are the churches engaging with this problem: do they keep silent, have they offered proposals, identified those responsible, called to a renewed faith with new ethics and sense of the gospel?

Please send us any reflections on your own experiences of your involvement over the last 18 months and any helpful summaries of situations you have encountered. We hope also to draw on our discussions from the CHRISM day conference on the 17th July. (Please note: we only have very limited time to prepare a short report).

Several of us are hoping to be able to attend (subject, obviously, to any continuing Covid restrictions on travel) and

we would welcome you to come and join us. The cost of the weekend itself (Friday evening to Sunday lunch) will be € 100. But there will also be a visit on the Friday to explore the social and political implications of the lignite mining in the area. So to stay for Thursday night also the total cost will be €150, and it will be possible to arrive a day earlier or stay a day later, if you wish. (Bed and breakfast costs available).

Please let Phil know as soon as possible if you would like to come. Registrations are requested by 1st week

of August, please.

The programme for the weekend will include discussion time in small groups (organised to aid understanding in the different languages), a Eucharist and other worship and the traditional Festive Celebration on the Saturday evening. As always, these weekends give the opportunity to meet and engage with a stimulating and challenging collection of people who focus on

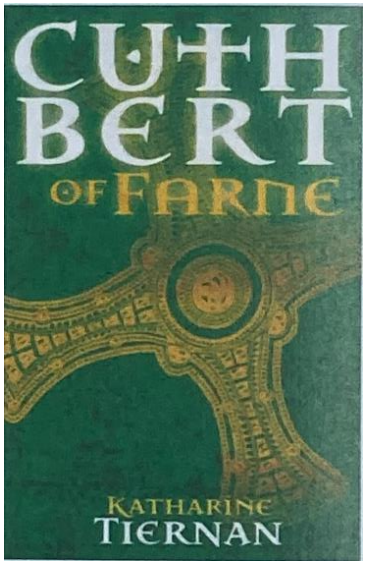
living out Christian Faith in their daily lives and work. It feels particularly important at this time that we maintain our European perspective. Do come and meet them.

Book Review: John Pearson

Cuthbert of Farne by Katherine Tiernan; Sacristy Press (Durham 2019) Pbk 295 pages £12.99

'Cuthbert of Farne' tells the story of the life of St Cuthbert (634 -688), some-time soldier, monk, hermit and bishop. This is, essentially, a biography, and I confess that I am strongly drawn to biographies. This is not just a dry chronological account of his life however, but is presented as a novel, enabling its writer to bring characters to life in a very real way, coloured by historical facts gleaned from two key sources; Bede's Life of Cuthbert and A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne

Except for those who have studied his life in detail, Cuthbert is a little known figure. Many will be aware his association with Lindisfarne (Holy Island as it is now best known) and have perhaps heard of the troubled journey, stretched over centuries, of the monks who took his body for interment at Durham Cathedral. In this book his progress from soldier through to bishop is documented in some detail, set in the carefully explained contexts of a split Church and State and the oft-changing relationship within and between the two.



Cuthbert began his monastic life around the time of the accession of Oswy, King of Northumbria (654-670). We enter the court of the king and his wife Enfleda. We witness the power struggle between Oswy and neighbouring leaders. Oswy is much concerned with developments within the Church and is renowned, amongst other things, for engineering the Synod of Whitby (664) at which the King ruled that his kingdom would calculate Easter according to the customs of Rome rather than the customs practiced by Irish monks at Iona and its satellite institutions. The differences between the adherents of these two ideologies drive relationships between many characters in the book. The fortunes of various bishops and their rise and fall born of the favours given by Oswy and his son Edfrith (670-685), killed in battle, and Aldfrid (685-705) provide the storyline through which Cuthbert is propelled. Cuthbert himself seeks the

simple life, one devoted to religious adherence, avoiding as much as possible the push and pull between the various factions.

As much as possible, Cuthbert avoids the limelight. Perhaps because of his perceived integrity and his focus on the spiritual life he is friend, mentor and confidante to various royal figures. Most notable amongst these is Aelfled, a daughter of King Oswy, who in time becomes the second Abbess of Whitby (succeeding Hild, her royal cousin and more famous predecessor). She first meets Cuthbert when, aged 10, she is living out her childhood at Whitby under Hild's protection and instruction. As she herself takes over the reins she regularly seeks his counsel, and also nurses him through one of his periods of sickness and fatigue.

Cuthbert is effectively portrayed in this novel as a real human being. As a young soldier, aged just 17, his shock at the senseless violence of the victors in skirmishes with the Deiran King, Penda, is a key factor in steering him toward a life in the church. We are shown both the simple joys he finds in his new vocation, particularly as a hermit on his beloved Inner Farne, but also the very real temptations he has to overcome ... as when, in 663, he narrowly avoids seduction by his pupil, the young Princess Aniel, daughter of Gartnait, King of the Picts …

Towards the very end of his life, in 685, Cuthbert's time as hermit is ended, when the new King makes him Bishop, intent on using him as a peacemaker between the various factions of the Church, based on the universal respect in which he is held. From his base on Lindisfarne he pursues an exhausting

programme of visits to all corners of his Diocese, meeting with all, high and low, to achieve his purpose.

Catherine Tiernan ends her book with a beautiful and moving account of the visit made by Aelfled to Cuthbert's re-opened grave at Lindisfarne. Here she performs a ceremony for her lifelong friend, lovingly anointing and wrapping his body, reminiscent of the attentions paid to Christ himself, both during and after his life.

Through "Cuthbert of Farne" I found not just a Saint but a very real human life, lived amidst turbulent times. It was a wonderful find…

And Finally…..

The valley of the shadow cast by fear

Through the valley of the shadow
Cast by fear
I've walked,

Fixed on how I might cope,
On what to do.
Panicked by all that might be,
I was lost
And did not see
That You
Are with me, always, everywhere.

Alone in silence, bottled up by pride
I prayed,
Shouting for help…
The silence stretched,
Until I spoke aloud,
And found your peace beside me, in a friend.

Now I am safe
But other people cry,
My nightmares heard by them
Instead of me.
Be gently present with them, suffering God.
Through dark and doubt and hopelessness
Bring love and life transformed…

And as for me,
Enable me to learn
To listen and to speak,
To trust that you are there.

CHRISM is on Facebook, 'Ministers at Work':
https://www.facebook.com/groups/129656640430436/

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https://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=3756477

CHRISM is the National Association of CHRistians In Secular Ministry

for **all** Christians who see their secular employment as their primary Christian ministry, and for those who support that vision. To further this aim, CHRISM publishes a quarterly Journal, releases occasional papers and organises an annual retreat. Conferences are held regularly and worldwide links pursued.

CHRISM welcomes members, both lay and ordained, from all Christian denominations, encourages them to be active within their own faith communities and to champion ministry in and through secular employment.

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