



Parables and Possessions

On economics and a right relationship with money

Written by the Church of Scotland. Presented by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.

This year's Lent course from CTBI has been prepared by the Church of Scotland, and is offered as a study and discussion resource to Christians of all traditions across Britain and Ireland.

In 2012 the Church of Scotland's General Assembly received a major report called *A Right Relationship with Money*. This was the final report of the Kirk's Special Commission on the Purposes of Economic Activity, which had been meeting and taking evidence for around two years.

The impetus for establishing a Commission to look at economics was driven by a strongly-held feeling in the Church of Scotland that, following the credit crunch, financial crash and the impact of the recession which ensued, things must not return to 'business as usual'.

This Lent course is a development and exploration of some of the insights which were included in *A Right Relationship with Money*. If you would like to read the report, or find out more about what the Church of Scotland is doing to take these issues forward then please visit the Church's website at www.churchofscotland.org.uk

Introduction

The Bible says more about money, economics and making a living than any other subject. It is clear, therefore, that God wants us to be in a right relationship with money and this will aid us in our quest to be in a right relationship with God.

In our daily lives we have to make lots of decisions. Many if not most of these have some dimension of money attached to them, whether the decisions we have to make are to do with our family, our community or our nation. It is vital that we make decisions which will impact for the best on those around us (including ourselves). Experience tells us that we have not always been very good at this.





In recent years, we seem to have turned our backs on some traditional ways of managing our finances in favour of others that are not always in the best interests of ourselves, our families, our communities, our nation, and even our planet. Many of us have not hesitated to get into serious debt in order to satisfy our desire for a 'better' life. Questions have also been asked about government expenditure decisions.

Living under the kind of financial pressures to which we have subjected ourselves can have very serious effects on our mental health as well as our economic health. A right relationship with money is necessary for healthy personal relationships to prosper.

The season of Lent has sometimes been associated with sacrifice, of giving up a luxury or taking up a new responsibility for a period. In this course you are invited to lay aside any indolence (by which we mean apathy and world-weariness) around the subject of personal economics which is sometimes the result of a sense of helplessness. You are encouraged to be more discerning about those in whom you place your trust. You are challenged to identify the best interests of your neighbours, especially the weak and marginalised.

How to use this course

Parables and Possessions is divided into six sessions, for the six Sundays of Lent finishing with Palm Sunday. It can be used by individuals, local congregations or groups.

The course focuses on a different parable in each session. Each parable is preceded by a Lent reflection. Although written as a Lent course, it would be possible to run the course at other times, or just use an individual session if you were looking for a resource on a particular theme or parable.

The materials

Each week includes a mixture of materials for reflection, commentary on one of Jesus' parables, the occasional quote to spark a reaction, some questions and a prayer. There is also a suggestion of something to do as follow-up, a practical action expressing Christian discipleship in the world.

You are invited to use these resources as a starting point; they are concise and flexible. Think what would be useful for your own context, or bring in other ideas or resources. To help a group leader prepare there is a brief summary of some key issues and ideas at the start of each session.



Temptation



Week 1: The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13: 1-23

Discussion

A gospel bias to the poor

In this session we hope that you will reflect upon two contrasting temptations faced by Jesus throughout his ministry: the temptations to speak out and the temptation to remain silent. With the Parable of the Sower we encourage you to think about the ease with which we allow the joy of following Jesus to be crowded out of our lives.

Reflection

Jesus taught his disciples to pray 'Lead us not into temptation.'

Jesus understood temptation. He faced at least two throughout his ministry. He was tempted to speak, and tempted to stay silent.

In the desert the devil offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, if only he would silently collude in the delusion of putting the devil above God. Jesus was tested; would he remain silent and allow falsehood and evil to go unchallenged?

In contrast Jesus remained silent throughout most of his trial before Pilate. He might have saved his own life if only he had said the words Pilate wanted to hear. Words acknowledging Pilate's power and authority. Jesus was tested; would he speak the words of complicity for the safe and easy option?

Temptation was a real experience for Jesus.

When Jesus teaches his followers to pray: 'Lead us not into temptation' he prays that we will question any system that worships wealth and possessions through a religion of consumerism. He is praying that we will pursue goals of peace and justice for all and especially for those least able to pursue them for themselves. He is praying that we have the courage to refuse to keep ourselves and our lifestyles secure while allowing others to face alone the dangers of the world. He is praying that we will know when to speak and when to pray silently.

**All that is necessary
for the triumph of
evil is that good men
do nothing.**

Attributed to Edmund
Burke, an Eighteenth-
Century Irish politician
and philosopher





Parable

Matthew 13: 1-23 - The Parable of the Sower

Jesus spoke in parables. He encouraged faith and challenged complacency with stories which had multiple layers of meaning for those with ears to hear. The parable of the sower is an optimistic telling of how God is at work to bring about the Kingdom. Though some of his listeners may be tempted to despair that God's Kingdom would never break in to transform their lives, the sower advocates confidence as he scatters seeds on promising soil and difficult soil without discrimination. The sower knows, and the listeners know, that the job of ploughing in the seed, done after rather than before sowing, will finish the job and give maximum chance for an abundant harvest.

Matthew interprets the story for a church facing trials and temptations. The seed is now 'the word about the kingdom' and one temptation to be avoided is 'the delight of riches' which may 'choke the word' (verse 22).

Notice that Matthew does not suggest that material possessions are in themselves wrong or necessarily harmful to the Christian. The warning is not that God's word has been rejected by the followers of Jesus in favour of materialism, but that like seed it is easily choked by other concerns and appetites.

In British society today there is unprecedented access to 'stuff', those things which seem to crowd out and take over our interests and our lives. Our society tells us that if we are to be truly happy then we must have luxury goods. An in-flight magazine for a major airline has a section on 'Lust-Have' items, a department store uses the slogan 'life made fabulous'. Meanwhile there is a growing inequality in our country; some enjoy considerable amounts of disposable income while many others struggle to get by at all.

Jesus proclaims that a life made meaningful is one which receives God's word like good soil receives good seed. A happy life is one in which God's word roots itself deeply. Temptations may come but they will not cut deep enough to destroy those roots. As his followers we seek the grace to be good soil. Then, with Jesus, we may anticipate a harvest of fruit many times more than might have been expected from the seeds scattered.

Go and do likewise: what it means for us today

Churches have a special interest in speaking about poverty. The Biblical warnings of the prophets and the example of Jesus teach us that the voices of the vulnerable and underprivileged must be heard by the rich and powerful.

In Britain today there are many widely held myths about poverty and its causes. These myths are convenient for politicians and the media as they allow those living in poverty to be blamed for their situation and permit the rest of society to take no responsibility for their condition. Myths about the personal failings of a whole section of society create stigma and a culture of blame and criticism: them for being idle, feckless, scroungers, fraudsters, substance abusers and so on. What's missing is any Biblical principle of caring, learning, serving and loving. These myths, commonly held by the general public and churchgoers alike, ignore the evidence and statistics as well as the wider systemic reasons for social and economic inequality and how they are connected to health, education and employment.

Poverty in the UK is not just a reason for charity, but is an injustice crying out for correction. A starting point is for leaders, in politics, society and the church, to speak out and raise the level of public debate about poverty and injustice. Otherwise the myths and lies about poverty, like the weeds in the parable, overcome the truth. "Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter." (Isaiah 59:14)





“Reject the values and false morality that underlie these attitudes. A rat race is for rats. We’re not rats. We’re human beings. Reject the insidious pressures in society that would blunt your critical faculties to all that is happening around you, that would caution silence in the face of injustice lest you jeopardise your chances of promotion and self-advancement. This is how it starts and before you know where you are, you’re a fully paid-up member of the rat-pack. The price is too high. It entails the loss of your dignity and human spirit. Or as Christ put it, “What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?”

Jimmy Reid, Scottish trades unionist and politician

Questions

1. How important is it that we pray for the wisdom to know when to speak and when to be silent?
2. Stigmatising people who live in poverty is becoming more commonplace. The newspapers we all buy often present half-truths and myths about the causes and effects of poverty. How does the gospel of Jesus speak out against such demonization or alternatively remain silent?
3. “Speaking truth to power” is a phrase from the Quaker tradition originating in the 18th century. Broadly speaking, ‘power’ meant three things: important decision-makers, societal values / culture and personal motivation / challenge. What does the phrase ‘speaking truth to power’ mean to you, today?
4. If you were to review the way you spend your money in the light of the Parable of the Sower, could you or would you make any changes?

Action

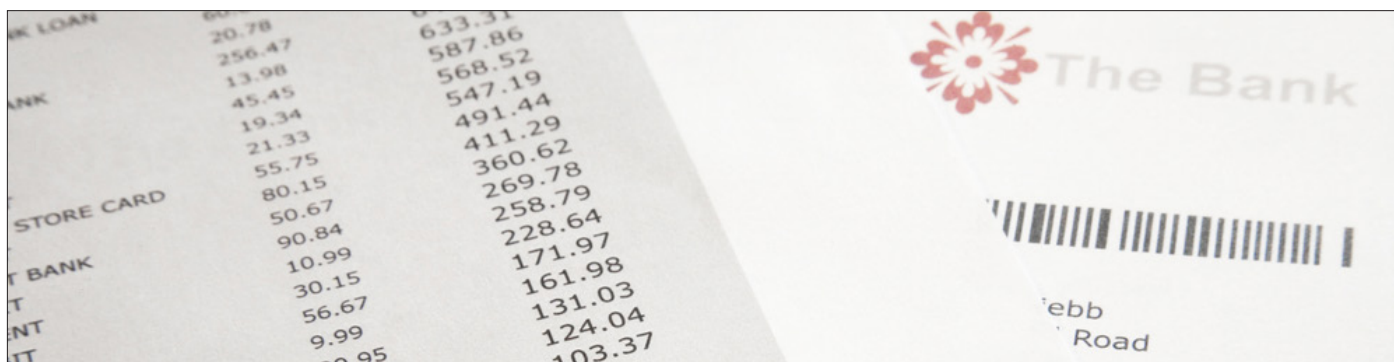
Read *The lies we tell ourselves: ending comfortable myths about poverty*, a report published in March 2012 by the Church of Scotland, Methodist Church, Baptist Union of Great Britain and the United Reformed Church. It is available to read online at:
www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/truthandliesaboutpoverty

Prayer

Jesus, meet us in the silence
 the place beyond the chatter and the clutter
 a desert on the other side of the temptation to satisfy ourselves with cheapness.
 There, bless us with wisdom to receive real riches and vision to see what we can share.
 Amen



Betrayal



Week 2: The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

Matthew 21:33-46

Discussion

Distinctive Christian values

In this session we hope that you will reflect upon the values which shape you as an individual, your faith, and your church community. Sometimes we betray those principles and core priorities which make us who we are. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants is a pointed warning to the religious leaders of Jesus' time and a challenge to us all.

Reflection

Loyalty betrayed is an agony.

Long before Judas kissed Jesus in the garden, the Bible tells us that Jesus was misunderstood and misrepresented. Those closest to Jesus let him down, squabbling over prestige. Others, seemingly interested in what he had to say, tried to trap Jesus with questions which would condemn him to blasphemy. In the last days of his life, the crowd in Jerusalem hailed Jesus at the start of the week but called for his execution at the end.

Betrayal is an experience many of us know.

Children in a school playground understand the rage and hurt caused when a friend does something which shows that trust is misplaced. They learn too the uncomfortable knowledge of having let down a friend.

When we place our own needs or desires or fears above the welfare of our friends then we may betray the trust they place in us.

Unfaithfulness is a part of life, but as we grow in wisdom we learn to forgive ourselves and others many of these trespasses both small and large. As we get older, and experience more of life, the light and the darkness, so our growing wisdom enables us to cope and to learn. Though betrayal is always unwelcome, with time, openness to grace may be at least partially directed to produce some good fruit: self-awareness, self-understanding, and empathy.





Some betrayals will prove to be so far-reaching that they change the lives of everyone touched by them. The bank crisis of recent years affected virtually every nation on earth. Perhaps we might seek ways in which, as individuals and as a community of faith, we could make this betrayal an ally of the good.

When Judas betrayed Jesus he sold out to a system that sought to destroy his master. Yet if we linger with Jesus in the garden we may glimpse how he prayed to transform this desperate and bitter betrayal into our ally. Knowing of the betrayal, Jesus still addresses Judas as 'friend'. We too may glimpse and pray for the grace to bring good out of wickedness and fear. In our lives, with many betrayals, our own and others, we are invited to pray for the grace to transform such trespasses into allies of the kingdom of love.

Parable

Matthew 21:33-46 - The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

Many of Jesus' stories are pretty hard-hitting; his parables can contain some blunt messages about what we do with the responsibilities that God gives us. And some of his harshest words were reserved for those who, as religious leaders, should have known better.

The story in this passage is one such example, and the point evidently wasn't lost on the listening religious leaders wanting to arrest him (verse 46).

The landowner cared about the vineyard, because he had invested his time and effort, planting, building walls, a winepress and a tower. As the vineyard in the parable was entrusted to stewards, so God has entrusted the welfare of society to its leaders.

In the parable, the time came for the owner to receive the rent due from those entrusted with the estate. It was a reasonable expectation, but not one which was well received by the tenants! Their initial response was to beat, stone and kill those who had been sent as messengers. Soon they felt bold enough to go further. When the owner's son was sent to collect the rent the tenants assumed that the owner was dead. They hatched a plot to kill his heir and seize ownership of the vineyard for themselves. That way the whole messy business of having to pay rent and to worry about stewarding somebody else's resources would be circumvented, because they would finally be in charge.

We are stewards not only of the physical resources which we call our own, but also of the Good News about the Kingdom. This Gospel originated with God the creator, was brought to us by Christ and entrusted to us by the Holy Spirit. Taking ownership of the Kingdom is not an option for us, just as it was not an option for the religious leaders of Jesus' time. All that is asked is that we tend the vineyard faithfully.

Go and do likewise: what it means for us today

It is fair to say that most of us were brought up to have values, though sometimes these were not very clear either in the way they were presented to us or in the way that we learned them.

The key value for Christians, as well as other faith groups, is to treat other people as we would wish to be treated. The universality of this value across religious traditions mean that it is often called the Golden Rule.

If we look back on how our society has altered over the past generation we see that enormous changes have taken place. Many of the values that were learned years ago have been forgotten or completely reversed. In





“[Shoes] are about self-esteem, how someone is judged and their place in society...[parents]...will even skimp on food and take on debt to buy their children the right symbols to avoid feeling excluded and stigmatised...if people focus on making money and getting on they often sacrifice their intimate and family relationships and their involvement with community.”

Carol Craig, Director of the Glasgow-based Centre for Confidence and Well-Being

some cases this development is wholly appropriate; the Golden Rule is upheld. However in the pursuit of material goals we may betray the Golden Rule, harming ourselves and others.

Research and international comparisons suggest that societies with greater disparity in wealth also show more problems with drink, drugs, crime and lower levels of happiness and wellbeing compared to more equal societies. (Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's book 'The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone' makes this case.) Emotional stress is often an outcome of this kind of lifestyle, putting work-life balance further out of kilter.

As we chase what we think we want (better lifestyles) we lose much of what we may already have, a good family life, friends and a real sense of community. In the pursuit of what we think will bring us happiness we are actually losing what we already have.

Questions

1. What were the values of your family or community when you were growing up?
2. How do the values you learned as a young person still resonate in your life today?
3. Why is it that so many people in our culture always seem to want more, when we know that it won't make them happier or healthier?
4. David Myers, a Professor of Psychology at Hope College in Michigan, says 'happiness is less a matter of getting what we want than wanting what we have.' What are the things that you have with which you are happy? How does this reflect your values?
5. What have you acquired over the years which makes you unhappy or gives you problems?

Action

Giles Fraser, an Anglican priest, has written that the most moral document in our possession is our bank statement, as it records what it is that we really value: how we spend our time, how we get our income, what we spend it on. One could similarly do this for a church budget. Look at your bank statement and / or your Church budget. Are your Christian values reflected in what you find valuable?

Prayer

Jesus, meet us in the vineyard
 the place beyond our high walls
 where fruit is growing in a fertile land producing the finest grapes to make the best wine.
 There, bless us with integrity to recognise times of betrayal.
 Strengthen us to accept your friendship that we might not waste our fruit.
 Amen



Forgiveness



Week 3: The Parable of the Prodigal Son and His Brother

Luke 15:11-32

Discussion

Forgiving obligations and the common good

In this session we hope that you will reflect on the nature of forgiveness. This might be forgiveness of trespasses, or sins, or debts. With the Parable of the Prodigal Son and His Brother we encourage you to think about what we do as a society when our fellow citizens are unable to pay their debts to us.

Reflection

Jesus said "forgive, and you will be forgiven".

Jesus said on the cross "Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing."

His executioners had no idea who it was that they were killing. They did not recognise that Jesus had been sent by God. They could not conceive of the life God offers through Jesus, nor did they understand the true nature of sin and consequently the true potential of forgiveness.

Do we?

Our sin is not that we defy rules about purity or morality. It is not even that we collude with greed and self-interest in politics or economics. It is that we have convinced ourselves that as long as we are upright and honest citizens we are the legitimate rulers of life.

In this pride we presume to be the best judge of what is good, for us and our neighbour. We justify our judgement even when this is shown to be disastrously wrong.

Workers lose employment and children drink dirty water or choke on smog while others acquire amounts of money they do not need and cannot hope to spend in one lifetime. And millions more turn a blind eye to the idolatry of these elites in order to enjoy their own limited dominion over their lives. Our ability to make decisions, to invent solutions and to harvest the earth's riches only serves to bolster our selfishness.

Jesus taught that a free and creative will is not a right but a gift. God's grace liberates us from





our sin of placing ourselves at the centre of life. God's forgiveness frees us to make a fresh start, and restore relationships.

Parable

Luke 15:11-32 - The Parable of the Prodigal Son and His Brother

The context and focus of the parable about the two brothers who work for their father is the relationships. Jesus told it to an audience of people with contrasting religious experiences and outlooks. We know that the Pharisees were there (Luke 15:2), those who carefully followed the letter of the law, and who felt no sense of being lost, of having wandered from the truth, and therefore not in need of salvation or forgiveness. They are represented in the story by the older son: solid, dependable, hard-working and diligent.

Also in the crowd were those who could quite clearly see their need for salvation; the 'tax collectors and sinners' (Luke 15:1). Only too aware of social pressures and individual shame, these people knew their part in the story; they were the disobedient, debauched and dissolute.

It would have surprised no one in the audience if the outcome of the teacher's story had been that good behaviour is vindicated and rewarded, while those acting irresponsibly got their just desserts.

Jesus, however, has other ideas. The younger son's actions are not judged, but instead his penitence and transformation is met with open arms, full of grace and love and salvation. The son has realised his mistake and has moved from saying: 'Father, give me' (verse 12) to: 'Father, forgive me' (verse 21).

We too may need to move from the ignorance of the need for forgiveness displayed by the hard hearted elder brother, to a realistic and humble understanding of our position. Only when we recognise our own need to be forgiven will we be able to have a relationship of honesty and compassion with others in similar need.

In response to a question from Peter as to how often he needed to forgive, Jesus told another parable. In Matthew 18:23-35, we read about a servant who was forgiven an incredibly huge debt by his master, but who then failed to show mercy to a fellow servant who owed him a much smaller debt. In concluding, Jesus makes it clear that to be in a right relationship with God and other people we not only need to forgive, but to forgive "from our heart" (Matthew 18: 35).

Go and do likewise: what it means for us today

In Scotland, in the common traditional form of the Lord's Prayer, we ask for forgiveness of 'debts, as we forgive our debtors'. In other English-speaking traditions people may ask for forgiveness from 'sins' or 'trespasses'. When we think about money and economics, focussing on debts and obligations can be helpful. These terms encourage us to consider tangible effects and consequences. If we could forgive others their obligations to us we would begin to make a much fairer world.

Over the past 30 years the degree of separation between the rich and poor in this world has widened. The poor may not always have become poorer in absolute terms but, in relation to the rich, they certainly have done so. This has been especially noticeable in British and Irish society. Some would argue that this is simply a reflection of the ways in which our economic system works and that it does not really matter.

There are big questions around this subject. Not least is the obligation to take care of the poor who are currently becoming poorer. Some argue that this is a result of Government policy. Some say that this in turn





is a necessary result of the way that we have lived our lives in the past. Our financial debts, which no one is likely to forgive, have to be reduced and the consequence is that there is less money for Government spending. What many in the Churches find difficult is that too much of this burden is falling on the poor.

Of course poverty takes many forms. Many of our young people are affected by poverty of aspiration. They cannot see a way forward and are seldom encouraged to look for one. Others are affected by lack of employment opportunities or lack of training provision. Scotland's Poverty Truth Commission adopted the slogan 'Nothing about us without us is for us', expressing a concern that exclusion from debate and decision contributes to a poverty of power and self-determination.



Questions

1. What caused the current financial and economic difficulties? How did your action, or inaction, contribute to the situation?
2. A burden is being passed to others in the future who will have to repay the debt. How might we seek their forgiveness?
3. Why do we seem to be prepared to live in a society where so many of our neighbours are troubled with debt problems?
4. The response to the financial crash has been for national Governments to try to reduce public expenditure. How might churches ensure that changes are fair and that Government is held to account?
5. If you were to borrow from, or lend to, members of your family, how might your relationship change?

Action

Set aside some time to write down all the obligations you owe to people, and the obligations that others owe to you. If someone has done you a disservice, something which has harmed or resulted in a loss to you, or taken an action which you believe is unjust, what process of forgiveness do you experience? Take a step towards forgiveness to improve your relationships with those around you.

Prayer

Jesus, meet us running at high speed to greet us in the place where dignity and decorum are forgotten, a home where you have watched and waited for our arrival.

There, bless us with forgiveness in an embrace that never leaves us and a celebration for all to see that we are worth loving beyond our mistakes.

Jesus, meet us at the door to the party
the place where jealousy and hurt are rife when brotherly love seems loaded with shards of glass and bitterness is the taste in our mouths.

There, bless us with forgiveness in gentle words that soften our hearts and coax us in to the feast with a certainty that we are loved to our very core.

Amen



Ridicule



Week 4: The Parable of the Rich Fool

Luke 12:13-34

Discussion

A part of or apart from the world?

In this session we hope that you will reflect on the ridicule Jesus suffered after his arrest. With the Parable of the Rich Fool we encourage you to consider how being poor in Britain and Ireland in the 21st century invites more ridicule than sympathy. And how the Church, proclaiming in a prophet's voice the vision of a New Jerusalem, that the world can be a very different place, is often dismissed as irrelevant by the powerful and by vested interests.

Reflection

So it has come to this.

Jesus stands alone.

Beaten and silent in front of this seething crowd.

The crown of thorns makes his head throb and blinds him with blood. The sight of skin flogged to shreds seems only to provoke ridicule and condemnation among those gathered to participate in this humiliation.

Who are they? Great and weak, traveller and local, the good, the evil, the apathetic. Possessed by despair and finding temporary relief in the cry: "Crucify him!"

Most do not even know who he is, of what crime he is accused, let alone whether or not he is guilty; he is at least foolish enough to be apprehended by a merciless political regime. But whether this man was wicked or naïve or unlucky is of no consequence to the crowd.

Here he stands, without friends, without hope, without excuses.

Jesus understands, and has always understood. This fury masks an intense fear; the prolonged traumatic stress of an oppressed people who experience ridicule on a daily basis and must stand silent and beaten under it. He is aware of the tide of loathing that rises like a wave in this crowd and thunders towards him, and why.





Men and women ridicule what they fear. Perhaps the most challenging image of Christ's Passion is the example he sets of one who insists on the integrity of love in the face of misrepresentation and violent mockery.

Jesus stands alone.

He stands alone at the table of the politicians and civil servants, diplomats and special advisers; the decision-makers of our society at work. They tackle decisions about third-world debt, welfare system, economic strategies and plans for recovery. How might Jesus invite ridicule in this situation? What fears might he be exposing in those with power?

As the crowd gathers to cry "Away with him!" where will you stand?

Parable

Luke 12:13-34 - The Parable of the Rich Fool

This parable emphasises some of the problems faced by those who are wealthy. The man in the story thinks of himself, and the things of this world. But he forgets God and all those round him who would no doubt have been in need, and who would have greatly benefited if he had only been willing to share his prosperity.

"Earn all you can, give all you can, save all you can"

John Wesley, Founder of Methodism

In our society it isn't the rich who are ridiculed, but the poor. Imagine the opposite of the Rich Fool in our time. Perhaps a thrifty parent who goes without to make sure their children had school uniforms and could celebrate Christmas? And yet our culture does not honour these parents; they are instead blamed for causing the deficit by the high level of welfare dependency. They should just get a job, and save for the future...

For many people, the pursuit of possessions is everything. Swimming against the tide of consumerism may invite rejection and ridicule.

The abundance of wealth and possessions is not in itself morally wrong. Paul is often misquoted; in writing to Timothy he didn't say that 'money' is the root of all kinds of evil, but that it is the 'love of money' (1 Timothy 6:10) which is the problem. The important thing about possessions is not how many or few we have, but what our relationship is with them.

There are obvious practical lessons in demonstrating generosity in all that we can.

As well as helping others, we can reassess our own relationship with possessions and money.

Response to Centre for Social Justice

In the first session we introduced the report *The lies we tell ourselves: ending comfortable myths about poverty*, produced by four British Churches. The Centre for Social Justice, a think tank with close links to Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith responded by producing their own report *Setting the record straight*, which sought to undermine rather than engage with the challenging points raised in *The lies we tell ourselves*. You can read a response from the Churches here:

www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/response-to-centre-for-social-justice/

By our common witness and example, we can share some of the elements of our faith which have spiritual





benefits. Love and forgiveness, not wealth, are at the heart of the Christian faith.

How, then, do we ensure that our relationship with our possessions is not only a satisfactory one, but is an optimal, perfect, one? How do we remain part of the world, but not hold tightly to money and certainly not be driven by it? Being aware of wealth's transient and ultimately unsatisfying nature is perhaps a good place to start. An awareness of the potential damage which possessions can do to our relationships with others and with God is also helpful.

But to be so counter-cultural is to invite scorn and ridicule; in Jesus' time as well as today saying something which flies in the face of the prevailing cultural norms will no doubt attract rebuke from those who control the levers of power.



Go and do likewise: what it means for us today

The Churches' commitment to being in solidarity with the powerless, the marginalised and the vulnerable is a core part of our faith. And yet when Churches and Christians question affluence or challenge assumptions about economics or politics, they are often derided. What do God-botherers know about the real world anyway?

What Churches know is the real life experience of people – in our congregations and communities, from every walk of life. Old and young, rich and poor, women and men. People confident in their faith and those who are full of doubt. People who are bankers and politicians, as well as people who are unemployed or undocumented migrants.

The Church of Scotland has described a 'war on the poor' where the rich and powerful in our society blame and stigmatise poor people; 'chavs', 'neds' or 'scallies' for their disadvantages. This propaganda war is waged by the media and political class when they spread myths and lies about the causes of poverty to justify cuts in spending and reform to social security. The truth is there is no evidence to back up the ideology which drives these reforms. It is a return to Victorian prejudices of 'deserving and undeserving' poor.

The collapse of a factory building in Bangladesh last year brought home to many people, and to many companies, the extent to which Western economies have come to depend upon the cheap labour provided by poor people in many parts of the world. While we stigmatise the poor in our country we collude with the social and economic exploitation of people in many

**“When I give food to the poor,
they call me a saint. When I
ask why they are poor, they
call me a communist.”**

Dom Hélder Pessoa Câmara, Brazilian
Roman Catholic Archbishop





other countries. This touches our own lives in very personal ways; how are the clothes we wear every day made? The issue, both home and abroad is not really so very different from the slavery that our churches campaigned so long and so hard to overcome in the 18th and 19th centuries.

As consumers we can find out more about the conditions of the workers who make our clothes and manufacture our hardware. We can then decide whether or not we are going to purchase that particular commodity, or make our feelings known to the retailer. As investors, individuals or part of an institution such as a Church, we can ask more about ethical investment, so that the Church's money does not go to support tax dodging, or where it can support companies which contribute to the common good.



Questions

1. God has given us the freedom to choose how we make use of our time, skills, abilities and our possessions. What is your relationship to the gifts God has given to you?
2. It has been said that 'what we possess may come to possess us'. What one object has a hold over you so that you would feel its loss more deeply than any other? Will you do anything differently having talked about it?
3. How much responsibility do we have as individuals and as members of an institution to find out, to challenge and question, and to call for and act for change?
4. In your daily life where do you witness a 'war on the poor' either as a victim or as an unwitting perpetrator?

Action

In the light of the material studied so far in this series - how we treat others in our society, how we spend our money, how we invest our energy - name one action you will consider taking in order to make a difference.

Prayer

Jesus, meet us where we feel the most fear
 the place where ridicule paralyses us
 inside our minds where lies are convincing and self worth is absent.
 There, bless us with security that you understand our pain
 and remind us that you experienced ridicule that we might trust again.
 Amen



Sacrifice



Week 5: The Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

Luke 15: 1-10

Discussion

What do other people sacrifice for us?

In this session we hope that you will reflect on God's invitation to us to make sacrifices which will express love to our neighbour. With the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin we encourage you to consider what others give up (perhaps unwillingly) in order that we might have cheap clothes or a carbon-based economy.

Reflection

Oftentimes we hesitate to seek a closer intimacy with God fearing that in return God will demand a sacrifice from us that we are not willing to contemplate. Look at Jesus, we say, no man or woman was ever closer to God; he even called him 'Abba' – a very intimate form of address. And in return God required that he sacrifice his life.

What we fear is that God will test us to see if we are worthy of the intimacy we seek by requiring us to watch helpless as one we love suffers.

If we pause a moment and consider what image of God this fear portrays we may begin to realise that we neither understand God's love nor the sacrifice Jesus made as God's son. In reality God does not test our love by inflicting hardship on us or those given to us to love.

The heartaches of life are simply heartaches. The tragedies we all experience are simply tragedies; they were never obstacles in a spiritual boot-camp.

Sacrifice is an invitation, and never a test of loyalty.

We all have priorities that we are invited to change or let die within us, by God's graceful invitation. The alternative is to watch as others make sacrifices for us, not by their willing participation but of necessity and under duress.

Parents who sacrifice the food they might grow to feed their children instead grow cash crops for the luxury markets of the wealthy.





Citizens of Tuvalu in the South Seas sacrifice their land to the encroaching sea, helplessly watching as their island drowns in rising sea levels caused by climate change.

In streets not far from you, children sacrifice their childhood to care for a parent or a sibling. In the light of the sacrifice Jesus made for you, and the sacrifices made for you by your neighbours both near and far, what are you prepared to forego for the sake of others?

If the answer is 'nothing' then God will continue to watch as people and environment are sacrificed to a god who is neither loving nor tender but rapacious and demanding; surely Mammon is the god with whom all should fear to be intimate?

Parable

Luke 15: 1-10 - The Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

In Luke's Gospel, these stories, along with the parable of the lost (or Prodigal) Son form a trilogy. At first glance it looks as though these tales are all about loss, impressions which are perhaps reinforced in our minds by the shorthand English titles which we have given to these stories: the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Lost Son.

Loss is clearly a common element, but in many ways it is not the main point of these stories. The parallel conclusion of the first two stories, recorded for us in near-identical words (compare verses 5-7 and 9-10), emphasises the rejoicing of the owner over finding what was lost, and the sharing of that joy with others.

Although most of us may never have mislaid a sheep, we have all spent time looking for things, coins, keys, mobile phones. To update the parables we might reflect on our joy at finding that crucial document on a computer which we thought was deleted but was in fact saved!

**“Were the whole realm of nature
mine, that were an offering far too
small; love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all”**

From Isaac Watts' hymn *When I
survey the wondrous cross*

Jesus told these stories to illustrate the importance which God places on finding that which was lost, those who have gone astray, whether wilfully or by accident, and the efforts required to restore them.

Part of our calling is to discern what sacrifice means in our lives. There may be times when God will ask us to sacrifice material possessions; there may be times when we are invited to sacrifice our status. It will help to consider whether the sacrifice is about loss to us, or alternatively about the gift or gain for others.

It was Christ's love for others that led him to sacrifice everything. Paul reminds us in his letter to the church in Philippi how he 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death.' (Philippians 2: 7-8).

Remembering Christ's motivation for sacrifice may help us to more fully embrace the season of Lent. It is not a season for pious self-denial. Rather it is a call and an invitation to a life of living through loving.

Go and do likewise: what it means for us today

Thrift is a word that is hardly ever heard in the Church nowadays. Scots used to describe themselves as thrifty people. Mostly it meant being careful with money. But it has a wider meaning. It means being careful with all our resources and using them wisely.





The modern equivalent is stewardship. Stewardship is about using our talents wisely. It is very easy to look around, in our own lives and in the lives of others, and see talents being wasted. We have invented ways of doing things that are enormously wasteful.

In the process we have given licences to companies whose concern for ecology has been minimal and whose activities have laid waste vast tracts of the Earth.

Naïvely we have assumed that decision-makers in government and industry will act in the best of interests of all of us at all times. So we have let them get on with it. They, in turn, have often acted in the best, short term, interests of only themselves.

We are called to live life to the full in imitation of the life of Christ. He threw the money changers out of the temple. We must do the same.

For Jesus the temple was the public space and had become a 'den of robbers' (Matthew 21:12). There has been a disturbing trend in recent years for people who profess their Christianity to be shut out of the public space. We must give up our quiet acceptance of this and reclaim our place in public life. We should challenge apathy and indolence, in our fellow citizens as well as in our own hearts. We know that people in our democracy have power and the ability to change things, yet so often we find it hard to articulate what it is that we hope for, to voice our aspirations.

Our imitation of Christ needs to become a more active, a more participative, Christianity. As the shepherd searched for his sheep, and the woman for her coin, so we must search, giving our time and talents for the common good.

Questions

1. What can we do as individuals and as Churches, to ensure that our Christian beliefs and values are reflected in public / government policy?
2. Scotland's Poverty Truth Commission talked about involvement of all people in decisions which affected them, using the motto 'nothing about us without us is for us'. How might Christians work both to create a safe space for those who normally talk to listen, and a place to speak for those whose voice is rarely heard?
3. What would our lives look like if thrift became our guiding principle?
4. Stewardship has been defined as holding something in trust for another. How do we honour this trust?

Action

Poverty and Homelessness Action Week takes place at the end of January / beginning of February each year. This week of action, prayer and advocacy is organised by Church Action on Poverty, Scottish Churches Housing Action and Housing Justice. Think about how you, your group and your church might participate in this work in future years to demonstrate your commitment to inclusion for all and reflecting your concern for justice. www.actionweek.org.uk

Prayer

Jesus, meet us on a dark and rainy night
 the place where we can't find our way home
 distraught, exhausted and abandoned.
 There, bless us with knowledge of your love
 and show us with the look in your eyes that any sacrifice you made was because you think we are worth it.
 Amen



Transformation



Week 6: The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Luke 10: 25-37

Discussion

A new commandment

This final week's session anticipates Easter morning. Change, growth, renewal is what the Church is all about at this time of year. Reflect on your hope that there might be a better, brighter future for all humankind. Think about what you can do to make this hope a reality for people trapped in crippling poverty or strangulating affluence.

Reflection

God raised Jesus from the dead.

Against all the odds and all the expectations.

No-one could have predicted that first Easter morning. Jesus was dead, body broken, blood shed, hope gone, breath stopped and spirit committed to God.

The heavens wept, and fell silent.

Darkness descended.

And then God speaks, the Word of transformation.

Light dawns, on a new day.

Suddenly, there is a new story to tell; of how love may transform even the darkest experience. Death





itself must give way and recriminations wither in the light of resurrection, of Jesus breaking free from the tomb.

How can we understand what it feels like to be raised from the dead?

Imagine that you wake with the sudden knowledge of how to solve the global economic crisis forever. You know how to transform the world so that everyone has enough to sustain life and meaningful employment to allow them to plan a future. Imagine for a moment how that would feel. Who do you tell first? Probably the person nearest you, because who could keep such good news to themselves? Then you tell those closest to you, including the team of co-workers whose efforts have assisted you to this breakthrough. How would you tell those who have prospered under the old system? How will you alert the world leaders whose responsibility it will be to implement your solution? These last two might give you pause for thought. A plan will be needed if the good news of deliverance from economic slavery is not to be rejected.

Jesus broke free from his tomb so that we might break free from ours.

So that new life may be allowed to sweep away all recriminations for past and present injuries.

Jesus tells us that love transforms even death. It can certainly transform life and within life the economic and political systems men and women create, worship, and to which they become slaves. These must give way like the stone at the entrance to the tomb, allowing new life to burst forth for the transformation of the world.



Parable

Luke 10: 25-37

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

In the parable the question 'what must I do to inherit eternal life' is asked by a lawyer, but he does not get an answer, only another question – what does the law say? Jesus was familiar with showy religion. He caricatured it as people praying on street corners, going around in flowing robes, or asking questions to showcase their own knowledge. In this story, Jesus punctures any sense of inflated self-importance by referring the lawyer to the law.

The lawyer then asks his second question 'who is my neighbour' as he 'wanted to justify himself' (verse 29). Jesus does not give him a legal answer, but tells the story of the Good Samaritan.

His listeners meet the unfortunate victim of robbery on the dangerous road to Jericho. They meet the priest and the Levite, bound by religious laws not to touch what they suspect may be a dead body. They





gasp to hear of the Samaritan who rides onto the scene: a man whom Jesus' listeners would have reviled.

It was the Samaritan who practiced neighbourly love and mercy. He knew he couldn't do everything, that he didn't want a lifelong relationship with this man. But his help is not just a short-term commitment either. The Samaritan's help saved the victim, got him sorted out, back on his own two feet, and put him in touch with the support that he needed. His promise to return to pay any balance to the innkeeper shows that he follows it through, to make sure everything is all right.

Jesus asks the lawyer to identify which character was the neighbour to the victim. In the reply we see a role for the Church. The Church does not need to be an expert, it doesn't need to be the best service provider, but it can help people to get the support they need.

The story illustrates the transformative power of love and mercy when practiced by ordinary people. Neighbourliness can transform the world.

Jesus shows that our neighbours aren't always the people we find it easy to relate to. They are often the people with whom we find it most difficult to get along. Just as God did not wait until we were good before reaching out to us in love, so we need to show love, compassion and care to those in need, regardless of whether we like them or if they are people like us.



Go and do likewise: what it means for us today

A quick look at the magazine rack in any newsagent's store will remind us that we live in a celebrity culture where celebrity lifestyles are valued more than any other. Flicking through dozens of TV channels with the focus on possessions, property, wealth, glamour is perturbing. A Christian ethic is no longer the norm but is deeply counter-cultural.

A society which seems to encourage a lifestyle which is not in anyone's best interests is hardly likely to make it easy for people to think about where their clothes come from or the ecological damage which may be caused through unnecessary air travel.

It is difficult to escape these cultural influences. They are all around us. These influences have also encouraged us to think more of ourselves as individuals rather than as part of a family, community, or nation. They also encourage us to think of other nations as completely foreign rather than as part of a community of nations. And that kind of culture makes it difficult for us to live in a right relationship with God.

All of this calls for a new way of thinking about how we are living our lives, the things we value, the





institutions in which we can trust and the moral code that should direct our paths.

Change will not be easy. It will require us to give some things up. It will require us to take up new things. It will require us to learn again some of the lessons of our youth. But above all it will compel us to look for the love of God in our lives and in the lives of those around us.

And when we have found it we must hold onto it, share it with others so that we, in our churches, can be a focus in our communities, for all that is good in life.

As Christians we have the potential to make a difference to our world. Each new day is a gift of love, from the author of love, for us and for our neighbours near and far. Easter morning is a joyful assurance of the ability of love to triumph over fear, if only we will leap from its tomb.

Questions

1. What first steps might take us away from indolence and powerlessness into resurrection joy and transformation? How do we take those steps?
2. Look over the past sessions in this course; what have been the surprising and challenging ideas that you have come across? You may want to write a list on a piece of paper.
3. How might these be indicators or pointers to transformation?
4. How has transformation helped to make our world fairer and more equal? How might it in the future?

Action

The story of the Good Samaritan holds together acts of both charity and justice. We are challenged to do this too. In the context that you find yourself, how can you be a Good Samaritan? For example, if your church supports a food bank, think about how not only to offer donations and volunteer time, but how to rectify whatever system is in place which means that people need to rely on food banks in the first place.

Who are the strangers and the marginalised people round about you? Will you reach out to them and form relationships and offer charity and justice? It can be a small thing, but could make a difference in someone else's life.

Prayer

Jesus, meet us as we are walking on by
 the place where we judge ourselves the most
 wanting to respond to need, but not knowing how.
 There, bless us with compassion and a fire in our hearts
 that we see we only have one option before us — to turn around and be transformed.
 Amen

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