

**Canon Carl Turner – Acting Dean and Precentor
Sunday 13th November 2011 at the Sung Eucharist**

“Despite the fact that, if you count up all the references, the right use of money is the number one moral issue in the bible, the Church has preferred to spend its time arguing endlessly about sex.”

Words of Canon Giles Fraser, formerly Canon Chancellor of St Paul’s, in the foreword of the report published by the St Paul’s Institute on ethics and the financial-services sector. According to that report which presents a survey of 515 people working in the financial services sector of the City of London, 76% said that they disagreed, most of them strongly, with suggestion that the City of London needs to listen more to the guidance of the Church. 76%.

There is, of course, a delicious sense of irony today with the occupy Exeter movement now encamped outside the Cathedral; I went to look at the lectionary and found we had the parable of the talents...all about the rewarding of those who know how to make money out of trading! Today I am not thinking of ‘talents’ as they are often explained in the church as ‘gifts’ but as the parable uses them – as money or property.

Of course, the making of money is not exactly the problem, per se, except when that money is obtained through theft, extortion or fraud. However, when the creation of wealth means that the poor and the marginalized are affected and made more vulnerable then the bible has a great deal to say about that:

“Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.”
Deut 15:11

So why is it, that the Church does seem so preoccupied with sex and, in particular, with same-sex relations when there is so little mention of that in the bible? Could it be that, in making the preferential option for the poor that the Church may find itself in an uncomfortable position? The Church of England is a great land-owner; it has plenty of assets; many of its bishops live in palaces and it is constantly asking for money! The Church, therefore, can be seen by many as a natural ally to capitalism and encouraging the creation of wealth. I remember many years ago a programme on the television called *“The black, the white and the purple”* in which the first black Episcopalian Bishop of Washington found himself in the middle of the capital city of the most powerful capitalist state in the world. I remember the interviewer putting him on the spot and asking him that awkward question that many clergy are often asked, how he could justify the church’s wealth and power, its buildings and schools. The bishop simply replied that if he did not have these things then he simply would have no voice...what mattered, he said, was what the church did with its power and influence. Poignantly we discovered at the end of the programme that the bishop had sold the Diocesan house and had moved into a fairly meagre apartment building.

In the bible, the opposite of poverty is not riches, it is power. And it is the abuse of power which is far more dangerous than the possession of wealth. What is far more worrying to me when I hear that 76% of those interviewed in the City of London financial services do not wish to be advised by the Church is wondering what or who advises them in things ethical or moral? Indeed, are ethical or moral values at the heart of financial transactions at all?

The occupy movement brings together the views of many people who are concerned with a preferential option for the poor. The term, ‘preferential option for the poor’ was first articulated by the Catholic bishops of Latin America back in the 1960’s. Although many were parodied as crazy leftites or Marxists that were out of touch with reality, nevertheless these bishops knew their people and shared in their poverty and protested against their marginalization. This phrase took root and became the foundation of Roman Catholic social teaching through the Second Vatican Council and, indeed, a favourite theme for the late Pope John Paul II.

Commenting on the occupation of the City of London near St Paul’s Cathedral, Archbishop Rowan says this:

“The urgent larger issues raised by the protesters at St Paul's remain very much on the table and we need – as a Church and as society as a whole – to work to make sure that they are properly addressed.”

Archbishop's statement on resignation of the Dean of St Paul's Monday 31st October 2011

The slave with the five talents was shrewd and, through trading, made five more. The one with two, did the same. The one with only one talent simply dug a hole in the ground. But it is the response of the last slave to the owner's return that is significant for we discover something of the kind of man the owner was – reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he did not scatter seed – is this a fat cat of an owner who makes his money in an unethical and unjust way? This owner describes the slave as 'good for nothing' and lazy; he makes the slave feel worthless. This is, for me, the heart of the parable of the talents – not the other slaves making more from what they had because at the end of the day they were only making it for someone else. No, the last slave may be lazy but he tells us a great deal about the kind of man that the owner was, for we hear that he is actually afraid of him. This is clearly an abuse of power and the poor slave is seen as worthless and of no use. This is the kind of owner he is: *“For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”* These are not the words of Jesus – these are the words of the fat cat owner grasping for everything he can get and at the expense of others. This abuse of power is typical regardless of the kind of capitalism that is experienced in differing countries and the fact that capitalism is experienced in different ways. After all, many socialists and anti-Stalinist leftists argue that the former Soviet Union was state capitalist instead of socialist, since the state owned all the means of production, functioned as an enormous corporation, and exploited the working class.

And the church has, in the past, also abused its power just as capitalist governments have abused their power. The preferential option for the poor has not always been exercised and the Archbishop is right to remind us that many of the issues being raised by protestors should be those that are raised by the church as well. The preferential option for the poor is not just about the equal distribution of wealth or the fair sharing of the resources of the earth, it is also about human dignity and self worth.

So, we have new neighbours for a while; I don't feel like resigning – they may be trespassing but, in fact, I like the idea of getting to know them and perhaps their presence will also remind us of the need to get our priorities straight as we approach Christmas. On the green yesterday, a young Muslim man asked the Canon Chancellor and me about Jesus and in the midst of the protest and the police and the placards we started talking about the incarnation. Perhaps this is where we need to find the ethical and moral voice that all in positions of power, and especially the financial sector should listen to.

Some words of Archbishop Oscar Romero:

“I am glad, brothers and sisters, that our Church is persecuted precisely for its preferential option for the poor and for trying to become incarnate on behalf of the poor. And I want to say to all of the people, to rulers, to the rich and powerful: If you do not become poor, if you do not concern yourselves for the poverty of our people as though they were your own family, you will not be able to save society”

15 July 1979