

Five addresses on . . .

Life in the Christian Community

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1 : Dealing with Disagreement

Texts : Matthew 18 : 14b - 22 and 2 Corinthians 5 : 16 -
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We speak a lot about love, peace and reconciliation in our church life, but are we any better than any other organisation when it comes to putting our values into practice?

Certainly I have seen a lot of caring and support in church life which is a testimony to the genuineness of our principles. But then I have seen excellent caring and support in organisations and groups outside the church. A good local pub can be a place of genuine caring, and sometimes it happens. The support that assembled round one of the musicians in our traditional music session — a group of people brought together by their love of English traditional music, meeting monthly in a pub in Steventon — was pretty impressive after her partner (one of the session musicians) took his own life.

Time and again, when I've been doing vision workshops and the like with local churches and I've asked them to list their strengths and what they would want to thank God for in their church life, high on the list (if not top every time) is 'friendliness.' Well, it would be, wouldn't it? Would *you* go regularly to a church that was *unfriendly*? Of course it's friendly to the *insider*! But friendliness, to the insider, can easily be cliqueness to the outsider. Jesus said that even thieves and robbers love the people who love them. The acid test is whether you can love people who you *don't* like; even more difficult — people you know don't like *you*. I'm not sure that Christians do any better than anyone else on that score, sad though I am to say it.

One of the churches I was working with had a vision that they wanted to be a "church without walls" i.e. friendly to the outsider. But the more I prodded them to say what they thought that meant, the more I thought it sounded like not-very-well thought out liberal sentimentality. So I challenged them to think a bit harder what issues they might have to face up to if they were to be truly open and welcoming to the world.

Suppose, for instance, someone with a disruptive mental illness came along. When I was at Edmonton, I had a guy used to come who would occasionally walk up the aisle and prostrate himself on the floor in front

of me as if I were some sort of god. At Marston a couple of years back we had an old lady with Alzheimer's disease who liked to get up and walk around now and then; perhaps wander up to watch the organist playing, or say in a loud voice "He's going on a bit this morning, isn't he?" Justine Wyatt, when doing a placement in Surrey, had a guy from the local mental hospital who would shout out things like "the Devil rules!" from time to time. Suppose *that* happened — would it open up divisions within the nice cosy church between those who can cope with that sort of thing and those who like everything to be done 'decently and in order' (as the apostle Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 14 : 40).

Or what if an openly gay couple turned up? Would the 'church without walls' be ready for that? Because if they hadn't really sorted that issue out as a body the arrival of that couple would inevitably and immediately threaten the harmony of the cosy clique that thought it was friendly and welcoming, only to find that it was split down the middle. Our sister church at Wheatley nearly got very badly caught on the hop by that one, and for months it was touch and go. Or if an asylum seeker who didn't speak English turned up? Or. . . well, I needn't go on.

What I'm saying is that friendliness is not necessarily comfortable. Friendliness — *real* friendliness — could be costly, demanding thought and work and possibly a change in attitudes and the old ways of doing things.

Friendliness — *real* friendliness — requires a willingness to face up to conflict and deal with it. A community that preserves its friendliness by papering over the cracks, avoiding issues that cause tension isn't really what I understand by a *community*. It's a loose association. I'm sorry to say this, but in my twenty years of ordained ministry I have seen some spectacular examples of the Church being absolutely useless at facing up to, and dealing with, conflict. There have been exceptions — when serious disagreement opened up over human sexuality I think the URC handled it pretty well. But by and large I've seen conflict dealt with better by secular organisations than by the church. It's ridiculous, and disappointing, and we need to ask what we should do to set a glowing example.

Part of the problem is our expectations. We kid ourselves that all Christians agree with one another (they don't), or that Christians—because

they're Christians—*like* each other (they don't—you only have to read the gospels and Paul's letters to realise that it never was the case). And because of this romantic idea we have, when we find all of a sudden that we do have personality clashes or serious disagreements we feel ashamed and angry, and we react badly.

Listen—what ought to be distinctive about the Christian community is not that we all agree with each other (we won't), not that we all like each other (we can't), but that when we find we *don't* we are second to none at handling it and keeping the community united. We ought to be experts on reconciliation and unity.

Now there is some very solid practical advice in the New Testament about how to deal with difference, dislike and disagreement, and I would like to establish some of these New Testament principles as working principles for us at Temple Cowley as a community at the start of my ministry.

Firstly, Jesus spells it out in Matthew : if you have a problem with someone then the *first* person you share it with is them, preferably face-to-face. You don't mutter about them to someone else. You certainly don't gossip about them — the writer of the Epistle of James is particularly blunt :

So with the tongue; it is small, but its pretensions are great. What a vast amount of timber can be set ablaze by the tiniest spark! And the tongue is a fire, representing in our body the whole wicked world. It pollutes our whole being, it sets the whole course of our existence alight, and its flames are fed by hell.

James 3 : 5 - 6

If anyone thinks he is religious but does not bridle his tongue, he is deceiving himself; that man's religion is futile.

James 1 : 26

Failure to go and speak directly to a person within the Christian community who causes you problems is cowardly, but to then make your complaint about them to someone else is dominating and aggressive be-

haviour, because they have no opportunity to speak up for themselves. What is another name for aggression that does not dare to confront its enemy directly? Terrorism. Criticising behind the back is spiritual terrorism.

So if you are presenting your gift at the altar and suddenly remember that your brother has a grievance against you, leave your gift where it is before the altar. First go and make your peace with your brother; then come back and offer your gift.

Matthew 5 : 23

I have never forgotten a big communion service I attended in St David's Cathedral many years ago at the end of a week-long Christian youth event. During the event there had been some severe tensions between different groups over religious and political issues. The presiding minister, Bishop Michael Hare-Duke, invited us to share the peace before taking communion, but he did so with the following instructions : "If there is anyone here who you have cause to thank God for, find them now and thank them. If there is anyone here who you need to apologise to — you must find them, say sorry and make your peace with them before receiving communion." *That's* what the Sharing of the Peace is for. It seems strange to me that people can imagine they can be at peace with God when they haven't made basic efforts to be at peace with their immediate neighbour.

Up at Cumnor, there was a member who took a dislike to me. Not that he ever had a conversation with me. Somebody told me they thought I said something in my first sermon that offended him. He was there, apparently, every Sunday, but never when I was there; and he wouldn't let me visit him. Not even the decency to write a letter explaining his difficulty. To this day, six years later, I don't know what he looks like. I have to say that I lost no sleep over it. I bear him no grudge and wish him well, but a man like that is a sad man who has not even learned the basics of Christian behaviour. I'm sorry to say that the Christian community was better off without him, but it was his choice. I'd have been pleased to meet him anytime to talk about it. As far as I know, he didn't compound the insult by spreading disaffection by criticising me to others, which is something.

So be warned : if someone comes to me—or you—with a criticism of another member of the church my—your—first question will be “And have you spoken to them personally about this?” If you haven’t, I am likely to say “Well, do so, please, and then come back to me.”

The New Testament rule is simple : speak to the person directly and in private. If you have what in industrial relations they call a ‘failure to agree’ then ask another person to accompany you next time. Not to gang up on them, but to witness the difficulty you’re having both for your sake and the other person’s — because, remember, it may be *you* that has got it wrong. If there is still a difficulty that can’t be reconciled, then it starts to become a matter for the spiritual integrity of the whole body. Maybe, then, it’s not a simple matter of a personality clash but an important matter of principle which the whole Church Meeting needs to reach a view on.

There is no cause, then, for mere personality clashes in whole-church discussions. That would be a sign of failure. Things like that I would expect to be sorted out before they got that far. Church Meeting can decide on matters of principle, but it can’t make people like each other, and it is no place for personal feuds! (I speak from immediate past experience.)

Once a matter comes to Church Meeting, the Meeting tries to reach a consensus—that is, a position that most people can agree with. It’s not a matter of majority voting, so that if party ‘A’ gets two votes more than party ‘B’ then party ‘A’ has won and party ‘B’ has to back down and toe the party line. The consensus may be a statement like “the meeting is divided on this issue.” That was what happened with the sexuality debate, and once we faced the fact that that was the truth of the matter we had to find a way forward together despite the division. However, if the consensus in the meeting is fairly clear, and you find yourself personally in disagreement with it, then you are obliged as a member not to sulk and distance yourself from the Church, continually carping from the sidelines, but to be humble and support the decision. And the Church is obliged to remember your unhappiness and to honour the sacrifice it is asking from you.

If we can embrace these simple principles and really put them into effect in the way we live our church life, then we can be an example to the world of what reconciliation, peace and community really means. If we don't, then our attempts to be missionary are undermined from the start — we'll be operating with a ball and chain round our leg.

It's a funny sermon, this, isn't it? I haven't mentioned God or Jesus. In my defence, the first thing I'd say is that it's surprising how much of the Gospels and of Paul's letters are taken up with dealing with these practical issues of living together in community, of dealing with money — down-to-earth things like that. They seem to say that faith is not the same thing as beliefs about God; faith is about how you live your life together.

And there *is* a faith implied in this talk of dealing with disagreement. The faith is that, although there is disagreement, *division is not inevitable*. Fallen, sinful human beings — or simply human beings who can only see the world through their eyes and not through the eyes of another, and therefore read each other wrong — *can* live together, *will* live together in harmony. Warfare, racist abuse, religious intolerance, poverty are not inevitable. It is not enough to shrug our shoulders and say “that's just how the world is.” Not unless we go on to say “but it does not have to be this way” and then act in the faith that this is true. That's not shallow optimism, it's faith. Not the same thing.

Paul's great revelation was that the age-old division between Jews and non-Jews, which seemed to be written in the stars, never to be overcome, *had* been overcome by the prophet Jesus who had allowed those human divisions to break him on a cross, even as he struggled non-violently against them. And though he was broken by the world's sin, in fact through God's power he won a great victory, broke the power of the Satan the Great Divider, and gave us new birth into a living hope.

All this has been the work of God. He has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has enlisted us in this ministry of reconciliation: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding people's misdeeds against them, and has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation.

Paul saw where human intolerance, where violent defence of fine up-standing principles leads — it led him to support the crucifixion of God's own beloved Son. *That's* where it led. But now that old way of life was past and gone, and Paul devoted immense energy to helping the infant churches — deeply divided churches, remember, since they had both Jewish and pagan members — to make that peace and reconciliation real in their own community life.

But peace and reconciliation does not mean ignoring our differences, not having arguments, pouring oil on troubled water, putting our faith in some sentimental idea that we all agree really. It means the excitement of facing up to disagreement and allowing the Holy Spirit to create new light and vision out of the heat. Facing up to it and dealing with it in the New Testament way.

2 : Our needs can build the community

Texts : 2 Corinthians 12: 7 - 10; John 19: 25 - 27; He-
brews 10: 19 - 25

It is a vital part of our witness that the world sees that we care for one another. For if we do not care for the neighbour we do see, how can we pretend that we care for those we do not see? It's increasingly recognised that the reason for Christianity's eventual enormous growth was not because of the fine theology and intellectual argument or evangelism (although that was an essential part of it), but because in a Greek and Roman world where religion had fallen into free-market confusion, where different philosophies and religion abounded, each claiming to know divine secrets, the Christians were living out a community life that stood as a shining witness against the individualism and fragmentation of their society. They weren't celebrating mysterious secret rituals that provided opportunities to escape the world and its sorrows : they were grappling with the world's sorrows head on in the life of their Christian community. They weren't out for personal enlightenment and escape. They were prepared to die for one another, if it came to it.

It is absolutely vital, if our message about a God who is Love is to be taken seriously, that we are seen and felt to be a pastoral community. I chose my words carefully — I said "*community*" — "See how these

Christians *love one another*". Not "There are some really caring people in that church". Not "They've got a vicar (or a minister, or elders) that really care". That is to damn us with faint praise. *Any* organisation has caring people. The most ruthless and uncaring big company has caring people in it. But very few organisations have a pastoral and caring heart.

And that caring heart has to embrace the whole world, otherwise the Church is seen simply as a mutual benefit society. That is why we must hold the whole world up in prayer Sunday by Sunday. But really there's no "must" about it. If we have a caring *heart*, noone has to *tell* us to do this, we do it automatically, at the Holy Spirit's prompting.

We can set up systems and rules for caring but we cannot make ourselves have a caring heart. So the beginning of our thinking about becoming a caring, pastoral community has to begin with God our Creator. God creates each of us different, calls each of us to a different ministry (some pastors, some teachers...), the active Spirit of God lays different passions on our hearts. But God also presents us with an image of *his* love for *us* that brings a lump to our throats, a tear to our eye, a sickness in our stomach. God himself, in the horrible mystery of a crucifixion, wrenches love and caring and passion out of dusty corners of our souls.

We cannot give ourselves a caring heart. God himself does it — not in the sham way that the Wizard of Oz gives the tin man a heart, or by implanting it such that we become robots — but by opening himself up to human misery and confusion :

*"...love so amazing, so divine
demands my soul, my life, my all."*

So that's our starting point : this community, called to be a pastoral community, is brought into being by gathering around a far greater love. Remember how, from the cross itself, Jesus saw his mother, with the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, and said to her,

"Mother, there is your son", and to the disciple, "There is your mother"; and from that moment the disciple took her into his home.

In that moment, at the foot of the cross, he creates a new family, across the blood ties of natural family, a family gathered around grief, solidarity and faithfulness to a loving son and brother. We too, gathering around the love of Jesus, remember it, and then ‘re-member’ it : giving Christ a new body, in a family made up of us.

One way of expressing that pastoral care is by caring for other people. That’s obvious. But there’s an equally important way which I would like to concentrate on this morning. And that is: by telling people when you’re in trouble, and asking for their caring help.

Isn’t that rather self-centred? Why *should* you let the church community here know when something happens to you?

There is an answer in the Letter to the Hebrews (10 : 24). It’s Because we are called to build a visible pastoral community as a witness to the love of God and therefore

We ought to see how each of us may best arouse others to love and active goodness.

We must do everything we can to stir up the caring heart in each other; bring it out to open expression (as God has done with us).

But we have to be on our guard, because acts of caring can get twisted away from Christian love into ‘do-gooding.’ Some people get a buzz from helping others less fortunate than themselves. You can think that your caring motives are Christian love whereas if we were honest we’d admit that we’re doing it because it makes us feel good, like the ‘do-gooders’ some people would like us to be to confirm their prejudice against us. (C.S.Lewis once wrote that you can always recognise people who are being ‘done good to’ like this — “you can recognise them by their hunted look.”) It’s not only asking for help and support that can be selfish. Giving it can be selfish, too. There’s no good thing in this human world that Satan can’t twist.

The opposite can also be true. Obviously I never met C.S.Lewis, but I’ve met people who knew him from his attendance at church in Headington who’ve said he was a miserable old sod, a cold fish. I’ve no idea whether that was true, but I’m sure that you can care for others out of a

cold sense of duty or obedience. Our caring could have no *heart*. What gives it *heart* is active compassion, and that is not something naturally implanted in everyone. I don't think it is in me. Some people need it to be drawn out of them by a cry for help, a call to celebrate. So it may be that an expressed need is the greatest gift you can bring to this church.

Oh, I know the saying "it's more blessed to give than to receive", or, as the Gospels actually put it :

*the measure you give is the measure you will receive,
with something more besides.*

Mark 4:24

.. but if we hide our joys and concerns from one another, surely we are denying each other the opportunity of giving support to one another — 'ministering' to one another? We are denying each other the opportunity to give — and therefore (in our turn) to receive. We might actually be denying 'saving grace' to one another. By keeping our trials and needs to ourselves we might be — only *might* be — holding back a gift from our fellow-Christians.

To hide our joys and sorrows from the community is to deny the community the opportunity of caring. It is to stifle the community's *worship* : how can we lament, if we do not know what to lament for? How can we celebrate, if we do not know what there is to celebrate? How can we offer genuine public prayers for the Church and for the World/System, if our hearts have not been *stirred* by particular concerns? To hide our joys and concerns from the community is to undermine the mission of the church, which is to 're-member' the suffering Christ and re-present him for our time.

Now, why might we *not* let this community know when we are in need, or have something to celebrate? I've jotted down a few possible reasons, and a response to each :

- 1 because we don't want to put people out, we don't want to worry them or cause them concern.

But if caring and concern is the oxygen supply of the church, that means you're suffocating the community.

- 1 because we're ashamed of our weakness.

But God hasn't called us to be strong, he's called us to be fully human; and as Paul vehemently argued, real strength is only found in weakness.

- 1 because we are proud, we want to be self-reliant.

Well, you know the answer to this already! You'll recall Jesus' condemnation of the self-reliant young ruler, the self-reliant pharisee, the self-reliant farmer... Self-reliance is a false god, particularly worshipped by the rich and out-of-touch.

- 1 because we don't want to be seen as whingers or scroungers.

You'll only be seen as a whinger or scrounger if you whinge and scrounge. Who said anything about whingeing and scrounging? Whingers and scroungers are self-obsessed. They think the world revolves around them, it owes them a living. But the very reason we want to share our joys and needs with the church community is not for our own sake, but to build up the church as a pastoral community, to proclaim Christ's love in visible witness.

- 1 because essentially it's selfish

It could be, if you think the whole aim of the Church is to look after you, centre itself round you and your needs, rather than around Jesus Christ, who shares not only your pain but the agony of the whole Universe.

There is a particular grace in being ministered to, and that grace is not found in selfish people. A lot of people can't cope with being ministered to. They are rude and brusque with people who serve them. They blame them for their own feelings of loss of dignity. I remember well

my time as a hospital porter, taking elderly or disabled people to the toilet. There were those who found it terribly hard to receive my help, and the whole business was difficult and embarrassing. There were others that would take it out on *me*, as if it were *my* fault they needed help. And there were others who could receive my (paid) assistance gracefully, laugh at the indignity of it — and thereby give the whole thing a richer, more joyful human dignity — one that left both of us richer.

Are we a church of the strong, delivering care services to the world out of our strength? If we are, then, sure, do *not* bring your concerns and joys, your fears and needs to this community because it will only be an added burden, and without it we could concentrate on doing good to others.

Are we a church of ‘do-gooders,’ on the hunt for vulnerable people we can get a kick out of helping? If we are, then, sure, do not bring your concerns and joys, your fears and needs to this community, because it will only divide the church between the powerful ‘do-gooders’ and the weak ‘done-good-to,’ and thus undermine this community of Jesus Christ. There are no ‘givers’ and ‘receivers’ here; we are *all* receivers of God’s undeserved love, we have *all* given a commitment to build this community — whether from strength or weakness.

Or are we a church of human beings, remembering weakness in strength, and strength in weakness? Using both our strength and our weakness to build this community? Bringing our love and our *need* for love equally to the table? Not selfishly, or in order to dominate, but in order to build community? Building one another up, drawing one another out, in love, as Christ (in weakness - or was it in strength?) first drew a caring heart out of us?

Give me the third church, any day.

3 : Overcoming the power of Mammon

Texts : Matthew 6 : 24; Matthew 27 : 3 - 7; Luke 12 : 16
- 21; Acts 8 : 9 - 24

The god I would like to talk about this morning is one that each one of you knows very well, and have had intimate dealings with all your life. The name Jesus gave to him was 'Mammon' — usually translated 'money'. The New Testament has more direct references to money in it than it does to salvation. Money, Mammon, poverty, riches, giving is a theme that runs through Jesus' teaching, his actions, his arguments with the authorities. Money is the end focus of his triumphal procession at Hannukah (Palm Sunday) — when he turned over the tables of the money-changers. It is there at his betrayal in thirty pieces of silver. Almost the first concerns of the infant Church (in the book of the 'Acts') is with money and property. And it is there at the end with the black horse of the Apocalypse in the Book of Revelations to John.

And what of our Nonconformist ancestors? During the Victorian period, when wealthy people started worshipping in our chapels — even building them, we started to forget how money was a key issue for the early pioneers. Uncomfortable hymns were quietly dropped from the revised hymnbooks. Take these two, for instance — verses from hymns by Isaac Watts, whom many consider our greatest Nonconformist hymn writer :

*Make not increasing gold your trust
nor set your hearts on glittering dust.
Why will you grasp the fleeting smoke,
and not believe what God has spoke?
False are the men of high degree,
the base assaults of vanity -
weighed in the balance both appear
light as a puff of empty air.*

Or, even more uncompromising :

*Lord, what a thoughtless wretch was I
to mourn, and murmur, and repine
to see the wicked raised on high
in pride, and robes of honour, shine.
But, O, their end!
Their dreadful end!*

*Thy sanctuary taught me so :
On slipp'ry rocks I see them stand
while fiery billows roll below.*

Is it surprising that Nonconformists had to wait until 1870 before they could take their robed places at the high tables of Oxford University?

Jesus never asked for money. He sent his disciples out without any. Money appears in the Gospels as a source of temptation, a cause of spiritual failure, a trap for unwary disciples to fall into. Jesus presents the choice starkly : it's either wealth or God. To set your sights on material wealth is to turn your back on God and go after another master. You cannot face in two directions at once. No compromise.

Mammon is, in fact, one of the gods. Whenever and wherever we are spending or saving money we are in the domain of this god. And it will remain Mammon's territory unless we actively stake a claim there in Jesus' name, as it were.

But the territory that the gods inhabit is above all the human psyche, the human personality, the human mind. *Every* human mind, not just some — that's what makes them gods, rather than spirits or angels.

This should not be surprising to you. Surely, you recognize that we humans are a bartering and exchanging species? We are *social* beings, and the societies and civilisations we create depend on exchange and barter in so many ways. We are an *intelligent* species — we are able to see ahead, predict, prepare, plan and save against a rainy day. We are an *acquisitive* species, we like to collect things. We enjoy power and status. And we know and *fear death* — and dream of immortality. In all these aspects of our mentality, Mammon finds a lodging place.

But although a god, Mammon is a created thing, like us — not a creator in the sense that the one true God is Creator. As a god, Mammon is not evil — or good — as such; any more than we are. As Jesus said — 'only God is good' — goodness (for Mammon or for us) depends on the choices we make, out of such freedom as we are given, in relation to the one true God. Mammon is a *created* being, and what our God created was good, we are told. But it is also fallen. So, just like us, Mammon can bring blessings and can bring curses, and is in constant need of salvation and renewal. Let us look at some of his blessings and curses :

MAMMON'S BLESSINGS

Enables us to relate and deal with one another smoothly, making community and friendship more powerful and far-reaching.

Evens out fluctuations in the seasonal cycles (we can eat the autumn fruits in the spring); protects us from the worst effects of random misfortune and ill health. Spreads risk, reduces people's vulnerability.

Enables us to specialize (you grow crops — I'll build houses) — concentrates individual creativity and amplifies the creative potential of a society enormously through interdependence in 'the Body'

MAMMON'S CURSES

Amplifies/exaggerates differences and tensions. Isolates people from one another's spirit by turning community into a set of transactions.

Distances us from reality. We start to behave as if we were immortal. We dominate the environment. Mammon ends up creating the very instability it was supposed to prevent.

Concentrates power in the hands of those with more marketable skills (who then control what skills are marketable.) Creates social divisions and turns them septic, eventually destroying 'the Body'.

Mammon lures us, saying 'With me, you can buy friendship, community.' And so you can — but ultimately, friendship is not a financial transaction.

Mammon lures us, saying 'With me, you can buy security for the future'. And so you can, but ultimately you will die, so a life built on the search for immortality is a house built on sand.

Mammon lures us, saying 'With me, you can buy independence, freedom'. And so you can, but we come into the world dependent on our mother, we go out (as often as not) dependent on the nurse. Ultimately our freedom is not about isolation and independence — its roots are in community.

So Mammon brings blessings and curses. The curses Mammon brings are dreadful, and cause untold, unimaginable human misery. Tragically, Mammon's curse bears down more cruelly on those who do *not* serve him as on those who *do*. If not more so — he's a bully of a god, who often flatters his friends. Yet, unlike us, Mammon is unable to turn itself round. God he may be, but his fate is chained to human will. He is like a massive supertanker at sea. He cannot turn himself round — to turn him round is a slow process requiring a massive amount of effort from

the bridge — and God has taken the risk of putting humanity on the ship's bridge.

What strategies do we have, then, for engaging with this god, wrestling with this angel, for turning the supertanker round?

Here are three : 'spiritual judo', 'sidestepping' the god, and outright confrontation.

Overcoming the power of Mammon (Part 2)

Texts : 1 Samuel 1 : 20-28; John 19 : 25 - 27

First strategy : "Spiritual Judo"

We use *Money's own power* to turn it from evil to good. We use the power Money gives us creatively, instead of simply collaborating weakly. We live under a political régime that says that a very important way in which we exercise our democratic rights is by how we choose to spend our money. Market forces are important. And so they are, but left to their own devices, and without any spiritual guidance they will cause (and are causing) unimaginable horror.

So our government's philosophy presents us with a challenge — a challenge which, I have to say, Christians for the most part have not even recognized, or have run away from. The challenge is to spend in God's way — to *insist* on spending in God's way.

For example : why on earth do so many Christians buy Nestlé coffee when our fellow Christians have fought and struggled to give us the option of buying Cafédirect? *They* understand Mammon's blessings and curses; they are practised in the art of spiritual judo. But they need our help in their spiritual struggle.

Our bank wants us to invest our money. They want to sell us all sorts of investment plans. The safest investment is to go along with the mob and invest in 'blue chip' companies — the big, reliable, transnational companies. But to invest in a basket of blue chip companies is to invest in armaments (because that's the foundation on which our engineering economy is based), it's to invest in companies that wield vast power in the developing world — and not all of it liberating. We can weakly collaborate, we can make spiritually ignorant comments about keeping out

of politics, and thereby transfer power to the rebellious bullying god — or we can insist on investing only in that which gives life, and peace, and community, and justice.....

We can ask our government to spend our taxed income in such a way that Mammon delivers blessings, not curses : on Education, on Health. I can ask our MP why, since I'm spending my money on National Insurance, I could not find an NHS dentist in Oxford. I can ask my MP not to spend £200 a year of my money on nuclear submarines bristling with nuclear weapons, and at least five times that on other armaments. Well, I can *ask*. I'm only asking to exercise my rights as a consumer.....

So, spiritual judo. Using our authority as consumers, a potentially spiritual power Mammon gives us, to coax out of an unpromising god the blessings he can bring. Notice that there is nothing secretive about this form of spiritual struggle. In fact, the more public it is the better. We return to this a bit later.....

Second strategy : Sidestepping the god

The principle behind this is simple. Avoid money. Don't deal with him unless you have to. Refuse to buy, refuse to be a consumer. The pharisees thought they were taking this line when they refused to handle Roman coinage (because it bore the image of the Emperor, who was worshipped as a god). Mammon (like the Emperor) is raised up on high every Saturday night on TV in our nation in the form of the National Lottery. So be a good Pharisee! Refuse to buy a Lottery ticket! Jesus, like the pharisees, seems to have taken this line in his personal life, relying on people's hospitality rather than buying services. We could do it, too, up to a point. We could decide not to buy Christmas presents next year, and make them instead. Or we could give non-material presents : we could give to an elderly relative the pledge of a weekly visit for the coming year — how valuable that might be! We could turn our backs on consumption by recycling — repairing rather than replacing and so on.

It's not a terribly effective method, but if enough people withdrew their stake in Mammon's fervent activity it would be bound to have an impact. The boycott or embargo, though usually flouted by the powerful

and the cynical, has an honourable place in the history of resistance to domination.

For many people, and for much of the time, however, it could never be a total strategy. Jesus recognized this, and when his final showdown with the spiritual forces of evil came, he said :

'It is different now; whoever has a purse had better take it with him, and his pack too; and if he has no sword, let him sell his cloak to buy one.'

Luke 22:36

Third strategy : Confronting the god, wrestling with it.

And so, when push came to shove, Jesus' way was to confront the gods and engage them in spiritual warfare. Simply sidestepping them is rarely enough on its own. And what about spiritual judo? Is that not good enough?

Not for us, it isn't, because it has a great weakness. It is about us wielding spiritual power over Mammon *through the very spending power Mammon has given us*, and doing it publicly. It leaves us wide open to the spiritual danger of pride, which Satan can use so effectively to render our cause impotent. Jesus' harshest criticisms were heaped on those who pretended generous and godly motives whilst actually practising domination.

He said to them, 'You are the people who impress others with your righteousness; but God sees through you; for what is considered admirable in human eyes is detestable in the sight of God. '

Luke 16:15

Buying is a two-way exercise. I wield my spending power, and I get something back, I get a return. To the extent that I wield my spending power in the spirit of Christ, I may also (as Jesus says) get a spiritual return. But the true God's way — astoundingly — is a one-way exercise in love which refuses to dominate. This is precisely *why* the true God's spiritual power is absolute and perfect.

No, friends — the ultimate spiritual weapon for the ‘binding of the strong man’ (Matt 12 : 29) is *giving* — giving without expectation of return, and what is more, secret giving.

But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing;

Matthew 6:3

Overcoming the power of Mammon (Part 3)

Texts : Luke 14 : 27 - 33 and Matthew 6 : 1 - 4

What strategy is guaranteed to break Mammon's power over us? Giving. Mammon is powerless when confronted with giving, secret giving, sacrificial giving.

You see, in *buying*, we are compromised. It's like suggesting that justice can be bought — that Mammon, not God, can bring justice. But in the thirty pieces of silver that betrayed Jesus we see the kind of justice that Mammon buys. We won't be fooled again.

When we buy a jar of Cafédirect in Tesco's we are not buying in the usual sense. It is quite a radical step for many members of the public to recognise that coffee producers are the victims of injustice, and that with a slightly higher price, we might be able to buy some justice for them. But to the real spiritual warrior its price is an irrelevance. Real justice cannot be bought. I remember the guy who came to the door to persuade me to buy electricity from another company. The argument was that the electricity from his company would be cheaper. I was trying to explain that I wasn't interested in the price — I'd chosen to buy our electricity from a company that only buys its electricity from renewable sources (wind and hydro energy). Price was a secondary consideration. He just didn't get it. It was a full five minutes before he could grasp that he was dealing with someone who had moral concerns that outweighed price.

No doubt to some, buying Cafédirect is an act of political correctness, a source of spiritual pride. ‘See how aware I am’. But Christian giving is giving with the danger of spiritual pride removed — it is *secret* giving. We are not urged to give secretly so as not to be embarrassed about our

lack of generosity! We are instructed to give secretly to stop any false motives dead in their tracks and test our faith. *The assumption is that our giving is generous, not mean*, and therefore we might want to exert influence with our giving instead of trusting the Church Meeting to make the right decisions as to what to do with the money. The secrecy is to destroy the corruption of patronage, to protect the community from the viral infection of spiritual pride.

If justice cannot ultimately be bought, then neither can salvation, although some people, if they really examined their motives, might realise that they are entertaining that hope. Some try to assuage a guilty conscience by giving.

The mediæval church actively encouraged the purchasing of salvation through the selling of indulgences. With money, you could buy a certificate with the Pope's signature granting assurance of a few years less in limbo, or even in hell, for you or for a deceased loved one. That's how the money was raised to build St.Peter's in Rome. That's partly what the first Reformers were fighting against.

It is often said that 'we give out of gratitude for God's love'. That doesn't move me. It sounds too nice, too sentimental. I buy a friend a drink because he bought me one first.... It sounds wet. Jesus' death on the cross cannot be likened to a friend buying me a drink — the very idea is offensive. The context of the Gospels is not one of God's social graces and niceness; it is one of spiritual warfare against the gods, principalities and powers that are destroying all hope of the Kingdom.

If salvation from the clutches of Mammon cannot be *bought*, then we do not give *in order to save ourselves* from the clutches of Mammon. Could Mammon save us from Mammon? Hardly!

The Gospel message is that *we already have been saved*, if only we would believe it. 'Could you be baptized with the cup I am given?' says Jesus to his enthusiastic disciples. 'You do not realise the strength of the king you are going out to confront. Mammon is a mighty king — much mightier than you realise.'

Part of our problems are because we haven't realised his spiritual power, and are being overcome. You can only take on *this* power if you are

prepared to lose everything — and Jesus meant everything. But Christianity is not a religion that demands martyrdom. The spiritual power of Mammon has already been broken. Mammon played its part in nailing Jesus to the cross. Its rebellion stands exposed. The resurrection humbles its pride

There he disarmed the cosmic powers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them, leading them as captives in his triumphal procession.

Colossians 2:15

Jesus has won our freedom from the gods and given us his authority over them. *The war is won. Now we must not lose the peace.* By our giving we are exercising that freedom — it is a *celebratory* act. That's why Paul says only give if you can give cheerfully.

And how can we be sure that Mammon's power over us is broken?

Do we have to give everything, like Jesus says? 'Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold'? I don't believe so. Horrible, pious hymn! How could anyone sing it and not feel a hypocrite?

Sure, *all* our earning and spending should reflect the love of God in Jesus, we do not have to give it all away. But if we don't, how can we be sure that Mammon's power over us is broken? That we *have* been saved?

Well, the wisdom of the Church and the Jewish ancestors is that, if we give 10% of our wealth away we can have a measure of confidence. 10%. That doesn't mean 10% to the Church, necessarily. The URC's guidance is 5% of disposable income to the Church — and that is probably about right.

Is there a danger that the god Mammon is seeking to dominate our world — and the Church, too, and has already to an extent taken hold of our spirits?

Yes.

So what must we do?

We must pray and pray until we can, in a spirit of celebration and victory, give 10% of our income away, in order to turn the tide, stop Mammon in his tracks, refocus our eyes on Jesus.

And what is true for us as individuals is true for us also as a congregation. We might sometimes feel we don't have enough money in this church to do what we want for the Kingdom. *Then* is the time to give more away! Because then, and only then, can we start to celebrate freedom, not bondage. That is the *real* witness to the power of Jesus!

4 : The Ministry of all God's People

Texts : 1 Corinthians 12 : 12 - 31 and
Luke 9 : 1 - 6

Did you know that if you crack a hologram into several pieces, each piece contains a complete version of the single image that was in the unbroken original? We've often been led to believe that our Christian duty is to try to become 'holograms of Christ' — little identical replicas of the Perfect Human. Needless to say, we fail. Paul reminds the Corinthian church that it's not like that at all. Each is different, with a different part to play in the Body of Christ. With any one part missing, the Body is missing something. When one part suffers, all suffer.

The 'Son of Man' is still physically present and visible in the world in the form of the whole worldwide catholic Church ('catholic' meaning, not Roman Catholic, but the all-inclusive Church with all its many branches). Each individual member has a distinctive part to play.

'It takes all sorts'. During my time in industrial mission I became well aware of an important management tool — the personality type. Different personality types have been identified, and by means of questionnaires, employees (or job applicants) are matched against these. It can be very helpful when putting a team together. For example, here are some of the personality types used by a consultant called Belbin :

‘Shaper’

Challenging, dynamic, thrives on pressure. The drive and courage to overcome obstacles.

Prone to provocation. Offends people’s feelings.

‘Implementer’

Disciplined, reliable, conservative and efficient. Turns ideas into practical actions.

Somewhat inflexible. Slow to respond to new possibilities.

‘Resource Investigator’

Extravert, enthusiastic, communicative. Explores opportunities, develops contacts.

Over-optimistic. Loses interest once initial enthusiasm has passed.

Maybe you recognise some people that match those categories. Of course, you can take such things too far, but it has its uses. Imagine what would happen, for instance, if you had a church full of ‘Shapers’. It would be a battle zone! Or a church full of ‘implementers’. Such a church would be extremely good at doing what it had always done, but not much cop at moving with the times, and just a little boring.

Is it possible, I wonder, that the Holy Spirit knows what she’s doing? That, maybe, she has assembled in this church a complete Body of Christ for Temple Cowley, with the right spread of different personality types?

One important message of these personality type things is that it says ‘It’s OK to be *you*’. In fact, it’s better to be *you* than to try to be someone else. Yet we’re still afraid of being ourselves in church. We had an example only a week or so back. Our worship group was being creative and developing some new ideas for our Easter morning celebration. Ideas were flowing thick and fast. Right towards the end of the second meeting, when it was too late to go back to square one, a couple of people hinted that they thought the whole idea was unworkable. And some kept quiet till *after* the meeting before voicing doubts, and then suggested that the enthusiastic ones were pushing their own ideas. But if there’s no resistance to your idea, how can you be *pushing* it? There’s nothing to push against! Now, Belbin identifies the ‘ideas-peo-

ple' — we need the 'ideas people' — but he *also* identifies people who express the voice of caution. And he says *you need both* for a team to work well. But you also need to know that you are you, and the other person is the other person — that each has their own contribution to make, and no one should expect everyone else to think like they do. In my example, it seems to me that the cautious ones lacked the confidence to know that that is who they are, that that is perfectly all right with God and the rest of us, and that therefore they should have the confidence to speak their cautious words. Provided that they, like all the others, know that *together*, respecting each other's distinctive contribution, the Spirit will guide us.

There's more to this Body imagery than meets the eye. I've often felt that the more competent industrial companies know more about human nature than the Church does.

Now, church *members* are people who have committed themselves to be body-builders. I mean, they're not just people who worship God and seek to follow Christ. They've taken the additional step of committing themselves to building the Body of Christ in this place. And that means much more than simply coming to church. There are many different ways in which we are called to play our part in building the Body of Christ.

One important way, as I've suggested, is by *being ourselves*. How often do we say 'God loves us as we are' and then feel inadequate because we're not like someone else? But be careful — *don't assume you know who you are*. 'Being ourselves' certainly doesn't mean 'doing what we've always done'. In fact, you only find out what sort of person you are by rubbing up against other people. I've known people in their 80s who'd never really found out who they were, or what God had put them on the planet to be and to do. Very sad. So we each have a responsibility here to help each other find out who we really are. The Spirit has called us to be part of this Body because of who we really are (not in order to become like someone else), so we'd better find out what our contribution is really meant to be. It's never too late!

So one way of building the Body of Christ is by finding out who we really are, and then being it. But there's another important way in which we're called to build the Body of Christ. And that is about what

we do when we're *outside* this church building. What we do 'out there' *also* needs to build this church. And that, too, is about being and doing what God has called us to be and to do.

I am not the only minister here. Every church member here is a minister also. Well, potentially. My ministry is different, but no more important, than yours. The ministry and mission of this church is shared between all of us who've committed ourselves to it.

But a word of caution. Being called to do something is not the same thing as *enjoying* doing it; nor is it the same thing as being *good* at it. Just because I'm good at playing the concertina, and enjoy doing it very much, doesn't necessarily mean that's my *ministry*. Just because somebody's doing a good job as a teacher or a nurse doesn't mean that's a calling from God. Just because Wendy's good with accounts doesn't mean she's called to be our treasurer for ever.

There's no difference between identifying my call as an ordained minister — or Bridget's — and identifying yours. We work it out ('*discern*' it) together. Just because you think you're called to do something doesn't mean you are. Say, to dream up an example, you feel God is calling you to put yourself forward as the Chair of a community organisation. Please — bring your calling to the Church and we will help you test the call. If it *is* a call (and if you are offered the position), then we'll commission you. On a Sunday morning, in worship — you know, a commissioning service (you've seen them!) Your work for that organisation will then become an official part of the ministry of this church (this Body of Christ). You'll be a minister! You will be entitled to ask for the church's support in that rôle. It may be that you're so busy that you don't get time to pray for the work. But — who knows — there may be someone in the church who has a clear calling and has been commissioned to pray for people like you; someone who will pray for you twice a day, even. A 'prayer partner'.

But (you say) I don't need to stand up in church and be commissioned to know the church's support. No, you don't — but there's more to it than that. Since you would be a minister of the church, we would be entitled to ask you about it from time to time. Since you'd be doing it in our name, we have an interest in you doing it well! As long as you're doing whatever you're doing *privately*, you can say it's none of our

business. If you were commissioned, it would be. But support and accountability go together. It is deeply *helpful* to be accountable. We all want to be accountable to God, don't we? At least, we *tell* God we do every Sunday! It ought to be a lot easier to be accountable to each other, humble beings that we are, than to our Lord, Jesus Christ.

I can think of a number of potential Christian ministries that members here are exercising. I say 'potential' because they're not quite 'ministries' in the sense I'm using the word, because they haven't been officially recognised. Wouldn't it be better if they were? Think about it — and think about the model of being church that I'm offering you here. A proper Body of Christ with arms outstretched into the world, and with its feet firmly planted in the world, yet fully integrated into the whole Body of Christ. Sometimes I think the Body of Christ as we see it is all head and mouth!

(As a matter of interest, we are finding that in the URC we are now commissioning and paying for many more types of ministry than the one I exercise. In this Synod we now have paid community workers, family workers, youth workers. But you don't have to be paid to exercise a calling by God.)

As a Reformed Church Christian, I do not believe that there is a special order of priests. I don't believe that priesthood can be invested in a few individuals for life. Priesthood — the responsibility of representing Jesus Christ in the world with authority — is vested in the whole Body of Christ. No one here is a priest. Every church member here, however, has a part to play in the priesthood of the whole Church. In our own particular sphere, in our own calling, provided it is a calling recognised by the church, we have the full authority of the Son of Man.

Do you feel that you have that authority, that power? What do you think it would feel like if you did? If this was a church made up of people who knew what God had called them to be and to do, whose calling had been recognised by their fellow-Christians, who knew therefore that they had the full support of their church and didn't have to carry the whole burden themselves, who knew that if they felt out of their depth in some way there would be somebody to support — well, this would be a real powerhouse of the Spirit, wouldn't it?