

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the Last Sunday after Pentecost, Christ the King Sunday, November 20, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

The Church...and Money....and YOU

This morning I want to share with you some thoughts about three important topics: the Church, and money, and you. The first and third items on that list don't come, I'm sure, as much of a surprise to anybody. The middle one, on the other hand, may be a bit of a surprise. Though I find it hard to understand, there are lots of folks who firmly believe that it's inappropriate for preachers ever to talk about money. They think that money is evil and dirty; not "spiritual"—something that has no place in Sunday morning worship.

The reason I find that so hard to understand is that every Sunday morning we gather to listen to what Jesus, the One we consider to be the earthly form of God's own presence among us—the One we especially celebrate today as CHRIST THE KING—had no hesitation at all, if we can believe the words of Holy Scripture, in talking about money. Just think about it: I'm sure you will recall his comments about alms-giving, his angry words in driving corrupt moneychangers out of the Temple, but I wonder if you've thought about how money, wealth, and treasure are the primary focus in the majority of the Parables and even the Sermon on the Mount. Here's a kind of unofficial but very telling set of statistics: In the Sermon on the Mount there are no less than ten direct references to money or wealth. In the 40 teaching Parables of Jesus no less than 20—HALF OF THEM—refer to money or possessions of value.

Just to refresh your memory, let's merely consider the names we've assigned to those scriptures: The Pearl of Great Price, The Unprofitable Servant, The Ten Talents, The Lost Coin, The Two debtors, The Hidden Treasure, The Spendthrift Son—listen to the words: Price, Profit, Coins, Treasure, Debtors, Spendthrift. Do these sound like words that have nothing to do with Money? Do these teachings suggest a subject that followers of Jesus are not supposed to be hearing about? I don't think so.... for the very simple reason that Jesus Himself talked about money A LOT.

So maybe it behooves us as followers of CHRIST THE KING to take a few moments today to reflect on what it is that Jesus had to say about money. Maybe we need to listen carefully to what Jesus can tell us about how money relates to the whole notion of what a Church is and does. Maybe what Jesus has to say about money can help us understand ourselves a whole lot better. In short, I want to talk with you about the Church, and money, and you.

One of the first places we encounter something that Jesus has to say is in the Sermon on the Mount. He tells us this: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth...but lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven." Just to prove to you that we're not listening (or don't want to hear), most of us would blithely agree with the world's clever observation that "You can't take it with you." Jesus is, in fact, saying just the opposite. He's saying that the way you earn and use money shapes and determines the kind of person that you will become—both here on earth and into eternity. Jesus is telling us that, while there's no such thing as a fireproof money belt

and you definitely will lay down your bank account at the moment of death, that's not the end-of-the-line. The person that you have become moves on into the larger life within God's presence—an ongoing reality—in which it matters profoundly what sort of treasures you have brought with you. Treasures of generosity, sharing, compassion, and commitment are eternal and they are fed by acts of stewardship here-and-now.

The second piece of instruction that we encounter from the lips of Christ the King goes like this: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Once again, either we aren't listening at all or it's something we'd rather not hear. Most of us would say just the opposite—that your money follows those things that you care about, where your interests lie. Jesus, on the other hand, is saying that what you spend your money on DETERMINES what you truly care about. Jesus says, "Put your money down and your life will follow." If you're deeply invested financially you will CARE A LOT. Personally, I have found that to be absolutely true. If God seems very distant, if the ministries of the Church seem onerous and irrelevant, then I challenge you to double your weekly pledge. You'll be amazed how much more engaged you will become!

Here's a third thing that Jesus has to say about money in the Sermon on the Mount: "No one can serve two masters." You and I have a basic decision to make: Do we care more about the things of this world or do we care more about our calling to serve as children of the Kingdom of God? Which is our real priority? To which have we committed our primary allegiance and our valued resources?

I don't know about you but I really grow mightily weary of hearing all the screaming about the government doing away with Bible reading in schools and prayers at public gatherings when I consider how much we ourselves are the ones who are hypocritically eroding our American religious heritage. Do you know what this allegedly God-fearing nation committed to the work of God's Church last year? It was less than one-half of ONE PERCENT of our net disposable income! You and I (and all those other followers of Christ the King) last year spent twice that amount on TV sets and internet, three times as much on tobacco, eight times as much on alcoholic beverages, ten times as much on movies and sports—over TWENTY times as much as we invested in the very thing that we claim is the most important thing in the world to us. Is it any wonder that people have stopped listening and are leaving the churches?

Think about it. Here in the United States we spend just over 97% of our shared wealth on THINGS; less than 2% on art, education, and charity toward others, and—worst of all—less than one-half of one percent on the work and worship of Christ the King whom we claim to be our "Lord and Savior." What does that tell you about the Church today? What does it tell you about the power and the effect of Money? What does it tell you about you yourself?

I challenge you to reflect on these three thoughts about the Church and money and you. They come not from the National Church or the Stewardship Committee or even from me. They come directly from the mouth of Christ the King, whom you and I claim to be seeking to love with all our hearts, all our mind, and all our strength. Reflect on these thoughts and let's see what difference it makes when you lay your own pledge card in the offering plate this year.