

You know there are some things you rarely get in the same package. Perhaps the most proverbial pair that never happen in the same place simultaneously are looks and brains. Obviously there are exceptions to this rule, most of whom are sitting in front of me right now, but we don't expect a nuclear physicist to look like a supermodel, and we're never surprised if the oil painting thinks Quantum is a brand of dishwasher detergent. My dog, good example, is almost unbearably cute: but when it comes to the grey matter, even making allowances for the fact that he is a dog and not a nuclear physicist, God does seem to have put all his eggs in the 'looks' basket. Give me a thousand years, an endless supply of irresistibly delicious treats, the patience of an entire communion of saints and that dog will still be standing there looking confused when I say 'sit'. Give him one-to-one tuition with the genetically engineered offspring of Barbara Woodhouse and Cesar Milan, change his name to Pudsey or Uggy, and really, really focus on that half a million pounds, and he'll just lie there very slowly trying to work out why that idiot making all the noise doesn't just give him the food, and stop making his head hurt.

You know there are some things you rarely get in the same package. That fabulous clothing in the sales that is at an amazing price never comes in your size. Cheap and right size never come in the same package. The mega-bargain food at a car boot sale is never in date. Boot sale and sensible food strategy never coexist. There is never a phone call from a friendly stranger that is trying to make your life better rather than just make your bank account lighter. The England football team and the ability to win something. Food that is tasty and calorie free. Some things never come in the same package.

These are, perhaps, silly examples of mutual incompatibility. But if we go to our Bible, where we would expect, most of the time, but not always, to get the serious stuff; if we go to the New Testament, because we're Christians, specifically to the Gospels, because being Christians means our faith is about nothing more or less than Jesus; if we go there, to the heart of our faith we will find one mutual incompatibility comes up again, and again, time after time, teaching after speech after sermon, and it is God and money.

*Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*

*How hard it will be for a rich person to enter the kingdom of Heaven. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God*

*As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.*

*Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation*

*So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God*

*When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid*

*You cannot serve God and wealth*

Jesus- and each and every one of those quotes are His words- could not be clearer: you don't get God and money in the same bag, even if sometimes you think nobody thought to tell some sections of the the C of E that one.

Here, undeniably, Jesus' teaching is as clear as it is uncompromising.

Economists are notoriously useless. Their predictions about the future are reliably worse than just tossing a coin. But they bang on the money when they tell you that poverty and riches are relative. There are no absolute definitions: we are rich when people have a lot less; we are poor when people have a lot more.

*Jesus looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."*

You are, I have no doubt, holier than I am. Seriously. I'm not up here because I'm closer to God. You're holier than me. But I wouldn't be surprised if, like me, when you hear the story of the widow's mite, you tend to immediately identify with the widow. Not necessarily because of our sacrificial giving, but because the alternative is 'rich people' and none of us are that. Except... if poverty and richness is relative, then, yes, if we look up, financially if not morally speaking, we can see many better off than we, in their purple and fine linen feasting sumptuously every day. And we do tend to look 'up' because the view on the surface is much prettier up there. But if we were

to look financially down we can see a sea of those with dog-licked sores who long to satisfy their hunger with the crumbs that fall from our table; if we look 'down' we will notice that almost all of us here, globally speaking at least, are not far from the top of the heap.

And then, we might start to worry. Because Jesus is clear and uncompromising.

*Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.*

*You cannot serve God and wealth.*

Fear not faint hearts for here comes St Paul riding to the rescue. Don't laugh. Such a notion will come as a surprise to members of those minority groups for whom bigots have turned St Paul's words into sticks to beat them with. But Paul knew that living a Christian life in the world inevitably had to mean compromises being made if lives were to be turned to Christ and souls snatched from the flames. His letters to the early churches abound with practical advice and- now and again- a tempering of the more uncompromising teaching of Jesus to suit the more cosmopolitan world of the Gentile churches. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Paul's teaching on divorce which considerably softens the impact of the hard-line stance reported in the Gospels. And in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul offers his listeners- and perhaps us- a way of dealing with money that stops short of 'sell everything you own and give the money to the poor' without evading our responsibilities as Christians.

The context of the letter is Paul's collecting of funds for the relief of the Christians of Jerusalem who have become impoverished. He reminds his listeners of the unbelievable generosity of Jesus before telling them:

*This does not mean that to give relief to others you ought to make things difficult for yourselves*

There is no point in impoverishing yourselves in order to help someone else in their impoverishment. Rather,

*it is a question of balancing what happens to be your surplus now against their present need, and one day they may have something to spare that will supply your own need.*

It's a good argument that comes straight out of the Jewish Wisdom tradition- we hear it several times indeed from the lips of Tobit. If you've got more now, give it to

someone who has less: they may be able to help you later. That help may not be in kind, but note will be taken in the ledgers of Heaven.

Needless to say, we are not let entirely off the hook. We are to give from *'what happens to be your surplus now'* and you can, if you'll forgive the term, bet your bottom dollar that if we're not both careful and prayerful, where we draw the line as to what is surplus and what is necessity will be in a very different place from where God will.

We do not live by bread alone, but we do need to eat. We should not starve ourselves, but we need to seriously limit the time we spend at the baker's. And by the way that bakers had better not be Asher's.

'What happens to be our surplus now' is not ours by right or by deserving. It comes. It goes. We must use it wisely while we can. If we cannot serve God and wealth, there may be ways that the wealth that is temporarily in our possession can serve God before it slips through our hands and is gone.

And make no mistake: all things will slip through our hands. As the sands of time slip through our fingers all things will turn to dust and when the wind blows that dust will be gone.

*As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."*

The time we have left before the end may not be as short as the first Christians believed. Those great buildings in the gospel were destroyed 1948 years ago yet the world has not ended; it is still here. It may be gone tomorrow, more likely it will still be here in another 2000 years. We will not. We must use our time wisely, and our wealth, even more wisely still.