
The Resurrection of Economics

Act 4.32-5

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 19, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

In the last week we've marked perhaps the two most significant annual events in the religious and secular calendars. Last Sunday was Easter, the most important day in the Christian year, the day when the impossible happens, death is swallowed up by the love of God, and all things become new. Three days later fell the IRS tax deadline – maybe the closest we get in the secular calendar to the day of judgement. And of course this year pretty much everyone feels the pinch of taxation even tighter than usual, because it feels like we've been licking an ice pop and most of the pop has suddenly slipped off and hit the ground and now the IRS wants to take some of the stick as well. Today I want to ask whether the good news of Easter in any way rubs off on the fiscal day of judgement. The questions are, "What is money for?" and "Does the resurrection in any way change the way we think about economics?"

The resurrection certainly changed the way Jesus' first disciples thought about economics. The early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles portray a community discovering how the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit have made all things new and turned the world upside down. Today's reading from Acts chapter 4 is about how the apostles gave their testimony to the Jesus' resurrection with grace and power. But it also tells a story of an extraordinary economic experiment. It says no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. There wasn't a needy person among them, for those who owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to those who had need.

I want to look closely at these words to see what they do and don't say about money, and to see what they do and don't say about resurrection. It could be these questions are more poignant today than for a long time. Perhaps most of us at some time in the last six months have wondered about money like never before. You think having money somehow makes you safe, or making money will make you secure. Well not recently it hasn't. Money isn't quite what we thought it was, somehow. And life suddenly feels very fragile. So let's look together at these words about money with the eager eyes of those searching in tough times for good news.

The first thing these words tell us is that money has a moral purpose. That's not as obvious as it sounds. It's quite common to find people who talk about money as something that's bad in itself. First Timothy tells us that the love of money is the root of all evil, but that's not the same as saying money is a bad thing. The early disciples don't seem to have regarded money as a bad thing. There's a lot of good things money can help you do.

Perhaps the person above all others who's helped the church to understand this is John Wesley. Wesley was a genius at showing how ordinary people can live lives of genuine holiness. His advice is inspiring and liberating, because he doesn't treat money as something bad in itself. For Wesley, having money doesn't make you a selfish person, and doesn't separate you from the poor. On the contrary, your money becomes an extension of your ministry. He says "Consider yourself simply the first in the number of poor you must care for." Isn't that so simple, and yet so liberating? Suddenly it's not a choice between being selfish or selfless, it's a simple way of standing alongside people in distress. "Consider yourself simply the first in the number of poor you must care for." And then he goes on, "Care for yourself as for the poor, by tending to necessities and nothing beyond." Wesley isn't interested in us punishing ourselves for the sake of it. For him the encounter with the poor person is an opportunity to rediscover what really matters. So where does that put our attitude to money? He has an answer to that one, too. "The problem is not possessing wealth, but possessing more than is employed according to God's will." Like the early apostles, Wesley isn't content that we give God 10% and then go ahead and use the other 90% any way we please. We needn't necessarily give all 100% away, but we certainly put all 100% to work for God's kingdom.

This is liberating because it shows us our personal interests are not inherently sinful. Like anyone who tries to live with other people, our PathWays summer interns we'll be commissioning this morning will quickly realize that trying to be selfless the whole time results rapidly in anger, bitterness and accusations of hypocrisy. The point is not to pretend that we don't have profound needs, but to find ways of communicating those needs to

one another that are mutually enriching without becoming manipulative. The resurrection of Jesus doesn't make us all into God, but transforms the possibilities of our humanity. The true joy of community is to discover that your need and mine become ingredients that build up rather than diminish our common life.

To say money has a moral purpose is also a challenge to those who would like to make money irrelevant to the gospel. Money isn't a bad thing – but neither is it a small thing. It's funny how those who are so sure about what the Bible says about morality and often insist their views should be translated into national legislation seldom seem to dwell on these verses about the first apostles. It's surprisingly common to find people who say Christianity is about going to heaven, and since money isn't about going to heaven, money's irrelevant to Christianity. But money wasn't irrelevant to the first witnesses of the resurrection. Their use of money was the most visible way others could see what they believed about Jesus' resurrection. Today it's the same. Our use of money is the most visible way others can see what we believe about the resurrection.

So money isn't bad, and money isn't irrelevant. Money has a moral purpose. But the next thing this passage shows us is that money isn't everything. The apostles knew one thing for certain – and that was that God raised Jesus from the dead and took him back to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit to infuse their common life with the power of the resurrection. All other information had to get in line behind that overwhelming reality.

In recent centuries it's become more common to think about money without reference to God. The two most famous thinkers to do so are Adam Smith and Karl Marx. What both these thinkers show is that, when God ceases to be everything, money becomes everything. For Adam Smith, God is at best a distant judge who remains to us for ever a stranger. As a result we are fundamentally strangers to one another. Smith evaluates all our transactions as interchanges between strangers. He places his whole confidence in the market and its ability to enable strangers to make contracts with one another. By what he called an "invisible hand," individuals pursuing their own self-interest tend simultaneously to promote the good of their community as a whole. This is pretty much the opposite of the vision of Acts chapter 4, because Smith sees human beings as isolated entities bent on meeting their own needs, rather than members of a body designed for worship.

If Adam Smith's view of human nature is bleak, Karl Marx' view is bleaker still. Marx saw our economic relations as a form of warfare. For Smith, we're all strangers. For Marx, we're all enemies. Marx' vision undoubtedly owes much to Acts chapter 4. The phrase "from each according to their abilities to each according to their needs" is rooted in this very passage of scripture. Marx' vision of the dictatorship of the proletariat is a kind of secular resurrection. But the trouble is that in the absence of God money has become everything. We're not children of God made for worship but instead economic animals built to fight with anyone but people of our own class.

Money isn't everything. And this insight should lead us to give up on the idea that economic relations are something we can ever somehow get right. The church simply doesn't have an economic blueprint to roll out for the whole of society or even for itself. In these unsettling economic times the church's place is not self-righteously to lecture everyone about greed. It's not the church's role to see the irony in Washington bailing out the car and insurance and banking companies and laugh about how America has suddenly become a socialist country. The church's role is to recognize humbly that no economic system works perfectly or ever will.

The scary part of Acts chapter 4 for many of us is that it seems to chisel away at the notion of private property. Central to the identity of America is the seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke's idea of inalienable rights, and one of these inalienable rights is the right to private property. So the words "they held all things in common" feels like a dagger to the heart of American identity. Acts chapter 4 is telling us that, like money, private property isn't everything. It's never more than what we might call a "useful fiction." It's useful, because those who want to take your property away from you are seldom doing so for noble reasons, and usually need deterring by force of law. But it's a fiction, because, as we all know, you can't take it with you. Money isn't a mechanism for ensuring earthly immortality, but a means of exchange whose fleeting quality reminds us of our utter dependence on God. The things that most matter, money can't buy. Those things are forgiveness and eternal life, and they are drawn, not from the bank, but from the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Private property fails us if it lulls us into thinking we can live as strangers to one another.

So money has a moral purpose, but money isn't everything. And the third thing we discover in Acts chapter 4 is what money is, in fact, for. In the history of the church only one group has ever seriously gone about living in an Acts 4 kind of a way over a sustained period. And that's the Benedictine monks. St Benedict lived in the early sixth century. Under his name and around his famous Rule countless communities have formed in the spirit of Acts chapter 4, looking to embody the resurrection life by sharing possessions. Benedict's Rule isn't designed for fanatics: it's said that "a lamb can bathe in it without drowning, while an elephant can swim in it;" in other words it's known for its humane and flexible approach to communal living. Benedict noted from Acts chapter 4 and other passages that the resurrection isn't fundamentally an individual experience. It's fundamentally a communal experience. Benedict discovered that money is for making community, not for protecting us from other people. This is what the resurrection of economics means.

When visitors encounter Benedictine communities for the first time, they're often disappointed, or even shocked, that the monks don't live in bare poverty. But if you notice, Acts chapter 4 isn't about poverty. It's about having all things in common. Remember our first discovery about Acts chapter 4 was that money isn't a bad thing. Money only becomes a bad thing when you forget what it's for or make it everything. For Benedict, money exists to create community by requiring the disciplines of sacrifice, sharing and obedience. The resurrection is a communal experience, discovered in worship, discovered in obedience, but discovered also in the power that's released by the sharing of money.

From Benedict we learn that money is never fundamentally a device for avoiding dependence on one another, but should always be ultimately a means for discovering our need of one another. It's scary to think of life without retirement funds, without medical insurance, without a safety net should we need to go into a care facility. But these things aren't much good to us without the relationships that make our lives worth living. Resurrection economics mean using money to make relationships, not using relationships to make money. Bernie Madoff has become the fall guy of the economic downturn and the Ponzi scheme has become the symbol of all our economic woes. But from the point of view of resurrection economics, the lesson is this. Make money your friend in the business of making friends. Don't make money your idol in the business of making idols. Never use relationships to make money. Always use money to make relationships.

It's good that Easter and the tax deadline have come in the same week this year. It ensures our understanding of resurrection always includes money, and our understanding of money always includes resurrection. It's obvious how resurrection makes the church, by giving us the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life. But money also makes the church, because trusting one another with our money and taking risks together in faith draws us into the kind of relationships where the resurrection becomes not just a future promise but a lived reality. If you've never been part of a community that trusts one another with money and possessions and takes risks together in faith, you've maybe never really discovered what church is. Because what's true of money is true of resurrection. Resurrection isn't a technique for guaranteeing our salvation and saving us from dependence on one another. Resurrection pushes us into new kinds of relationship with one another in the power of the Holy Spirit. Likewise money isn't a device for protecting us from dependence on each other. Money is for creating new kinds of interdependence by the kinds of community created when we stop regarding one another fundamentally as strangers.

Money has a moral purpose. Money isn't everything. Money is for expressing in our relationships with one another the intimacy of our dependence on and trust in God. After all, the resurrection is something that in Christ we all have in common, and no one need be short of eternal life. Remember that Acts chapter 4 is fundamentally a story about God. God in Christ has sold all he has, and laid it at our, his apostles', feet.