

March 17, 2013

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 12:1-8

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector

Money Worries

Utilitarianism is the name given to a philosophy that flowered and flourished in the late 18th Century and has influenced our lives ever since. In essence it is the idea that the proper course of action in most circumstances is that which has the greatest *utility* for the greatest number of people. The proper course of action in most circumstances is that which brings about the greatest increase of happiness and reduction of suffering for the greatest number of people. It is a philosophy that has been criticized by many including Karl Marx and Pope John Paul II.

Judas Iscariot, at dinner in Bethany, six days before the Passover, makes a utilitarian argument about the costly perfume with which Mary anointed Jesus' feet, and cased the fragrance to fill the house. Mary was without doubt making an extravagant gift and offering, the sort of thing that we do when we are being governed by love. But Judas asked "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii (or about one year of a standard wage) and the money given to the poor?" Deprive a handful of people of this expensive experience and you could feed hundreds of people for a week or two.

What is going on with Judas that he needs to be critical of Mary and suggest that what she did was wrong? Maybe he was uncomfortable with such a display of sexual intimacy as Mary wiped Jesus' body with the ointment using her hair. Maybe, as John suggests, he was a thief who wanted more money in the coffers from which he could steal. Maybe John was wrong and Judas really was concerned about the plight of the poor. Whatever it was it was clear that Judas was anxious about something, as any of us might have been when something not quite seemly or appropriate is going on, and that anxiety focused itself or landed on money. One problem with many utilitarian arguments is that they tend to quantify human value. They tend to measure happiness or suffering in economic terms. They tend to reduce us to being consumers, consign us to live in a world marked by scarcity and to suggest that anything that is not quantifiable is not quite real.

We see this utilitarian tendency at work in our lives and times. In one example, consider how the value of a university education is being weighed in terms of the earning potential of a graduate. In another look at how difficult it is for courts to find any kind of consistency in their awarding monetary damages for pain and suffering, as they struggle with the utilitarian foundations of the very idea of awarding damages.

Every one of us is more like Judas than we care to imagine or admit. Money occupies a lot of our thoughts one way or another. If we want to be free, if we want to live without anxiety and if we want to be able to hold our heads high and be able to look any other

human being in the eye, then we must get clear about our relationship with money. It is a fundamental and probably lifelong spiritual task.

Some of you know that I teach a group of students at the Candler School of Theology each year, --students who are considering and exploring congregational ministry. This year I am enjoying a particularly bright group and in a recent session we were discussing stewardship, budgeting and administration. We spent most of our time discussing stewardship and why anyone would do well to give money to the church. It was enlightening for all of us to notice that the anxiety in the room escalated as our conversation progressed. I kept asking why they thought I or anyone would do well to give money and almost all of the answers were in terms of 'oughts and shoulds'. We ought to give because God first gave to us. We ought to give because the Bible teaches the tithe. Our denominations have set the tithe as the minimum standard of Christian giving and we ought to live up to that as leaders in the church. We ought to set an example. As we talked giving seemed more and more a burden and obligation, a consequence of *noblesse oblige*, a source of guilt for those of us --most of us--not measuring up to the oughts.

I'm among those who don't do well with shoulds and oughts. I was intrigued to read of something officially called the Behavioral Insights Team, but better known as 'The Nudge Unit' of David Cameron's conservative government. A group of academics, with quite a lot of substantial research behind their work, find ways to get us to do things that are good but which we otherwise avoid. One success was with getting people to insulate their lofts. All sorts of incentives were offered to get people to put rolls of fiberglass. But the product went unused because of the sheer hassle for most of us of cleaning out the attic. When firms started offering to clean out attics first, and remove any junk, the uptake on offers increased threefold even though it cost the customer more. When this service was subsidized to cost there was a fivefold increase in loft insulation.¹ I wanted my students to figure out how to nudge me to respond to Jesus' clear teaching that giving money away and putting my trust in God for life is a habit worth nurturing, a practice worth pursuing: the practice of generosity.

At my best, I give because generosity is a spiritual practice almost as critical as worship for my development as a human being. I give in both a sustained and sustaining way through pledge commitments, and through the more serendipitous kinds of giving on the spur of the moment. I give because I want to remember and affirm that God is trustworthy for life; because I want to be freed from anxiety around money; because it helps me remember that I am a child of God and act as such; and because of all things, giving helps me remember what really matters in life and what doesn't. Money, the focus of so much of our lives, is, in the end, just money.

When Judas criticizes Mary, Jesus tells him "Leave her alone." He acknowledges that sometimes the utilitarian argument misses what is of true importance and ultimate worth. In no way does he deny the needs or claims of the poor. But he affirms relational giving, giving from love, giving extravagantly and giving of our selves.

¹ *Inside the Mind of the Nudge Unit*, Chris Bell in *The Week (UK)* Issue 909 p.52

Why do you give? Why might you give? Have you experienced the blessing of being freed by your practice of being generous? It makes no utilitarian sense, and yet the practice of generosity and so living generously is the only thing that makes sense.

Let us respond to the gospel in silence and in prayer...