

Commitment for Life 18th March 2018

When we respond to God's love, when the teachings of Jesus make sense to us and we become his disciple, when we call ourselves a Christian, when the uniqueness of Jesus as our Saviour and God's own Son becomes the most important thing in our life, when we make a public declaration as a church member that we believe in the Trinity and are a follower of Jesus we are making a Commitment - a Commitment for Life. As a part of that Commitment, the United Reformed Church asks, expects, challenges, invites us to give 1% of our disposable income to the work of Christian Aid through the Commitment for Life appeal. When a church decides to support C4L they choose a project to be their focus. The Church at Carrs Lane has chosen to support a project in the Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories. I am asking you to give your support to this appeal today.

Luke 12 v 13 - 21

A man had plenty of houses on Park Lane and Mayfair, but he knew in his heart he could make more money by bulldozing them and building hotels. But on the day his hotel was finished, he died, and God said to him "You fool. This is the end of your life, and all this work – who benefits from it now?"

I really don't like playing Monopoly. It always seems to lead to family arguments and bring out the worst in people. In 2016 there was a Christmas Monopoly helpline, run by the manufacturers, to help resolve disputes – a publicity stunt that reminds us how angry the unfairness of one player dominating the game can make us. Monopoly is based on "The Landlord's Game" made by a Quaker woman, Elizabeth Magie. Her property purchasing game had two sets of rules, which together taught that the modern economy made landowners rich at the expense of tenants. Her game showed that different tax systems could redistribute wealth more equally. Not like our game of Monopoly today. However, as her patent ran out, a man 'invented' Monopoly using only the unequal rules, and that is the game we still play today.

Unequal rules don't just happen in a game - they happen in real life as well. The Palestinian economy is small and stagnant because of unequal rules. A bit like Monopoly. The Israeli occupation has been going on for 50 years now, imposing restrictions which hamper Palestinian business owners. Palestinian artisans have largely depended on sales to tourist and pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. In Bethlehem 60% of the population depends on tourism-related income. Whenever tourist numbers drop because of spikes in conflict or Israeli

immigration policies, sales and income are seriously affected. The unemployment rate in Bethlehem is 17.5%, rising to 40% in the under 30s. Bethlehem Fair Trade Artisans is one of the projects that C4L is supporting. Nidal Dakkarat belongs to BFTA. Nidal's father died when he was only 15, fifteen years ago and he left school so that he could help his mother and younger sisters. He started carving olive wood. Olive wood is cheaper and better quality in the winter but Nidal could only afford to buy wood when an order came in and he was sure of a sale. BFTA were offered a micro loan scheme so that fifteen small businesses could buy their wood at the best time and the best quality. This has enabled Nidal and the others to increase their orders. We sell some of their products in our Traidcraft shop. C4L is not a sticking plaster approach to a crisis but an ongoing support to give people like Nidal the opportunity to become more self-sufficient, even though they live with unequal rules. So that they have a chance to know life in all its fullness.

Luke 12 v 22 - 34

Jesus continues to talk to his disciples. The story Jesus told in the first reading is a warning for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God. He concludes this passage "For where your treasure is there your heart will be also". Our priority should be to focus on God's love and God's heaven, rather than focus on money. He says that the flowers and birds have all they need but don't worry about money or build themselves barns.

Now, I don't think that Jesus was impractical. I don't think he meant us to say, "God loves me - so I will just sit here and wait to be fed and clothed". I think Jesus is challenging us to consider where our priorities lie. What we think about, what occupies our minds. Jesus has told us that God loves us far more than the flowers or birds, so we must put our trust in God. If we are constantly thinking about the next holiday, the next fashion, the next gadget, the next extravagant way to spend our money, we don't have much time to focus on God's heaven and trust in God. We can sometimes think that all the earthly wealth we have is our own doing. I am not saying we haven't worked hard to have the money in our bank but we also know that for most of us the circumstances of our birth have contributed to that wealth. I know that a child born in Palestine will not have all the opportunities which I have had.

Theologies of grace remind us that we receive forgiveness and are loved by God because God has decided it will be so, and we cannot do anything to earn either of these things. Blessings cannot be earned. Perhaps we should think of our earthly wealth not as a treasure or a blessing but as a responsibility, a

stewardship task. God cares what we do with our money, and what our money gets up to as it travels around the world! What we buy, where we invest, how we give.

Let me tell you a story about John Wesley! John Wesley had a rule for life - to save all he could and to give all he could. When he was at Oxford he had an income of £30 a year. He lived on £28 and gave £2 away. When his income increased to £60, £90, £120 a year, he still lived on £28 a year and gave the rest away. He had to make a declaration about how much silver and gold he had. His reply was "I have two silver spoons in London and two in Bristol. This is all the silver and gold I have, and I shall not buy anymore, while so many around me want bread."

Our thought for the day might be - beware that our money does not become a distraction from our relationship with God. Is our commitment for life one that seeks to change the global economy, to bring in God's heaven. Let us be aware that our money and our use of it always and every day already shapes the world. Let that image of life in all its fullness for all God's creation be one that shapes our decision making next time we open our purse or our wallet, perhaps every time we open it, as we continue to pray that God's will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

We will take up our offering...

*We have taken from our pockets, from our enough, and our plenty,
and we commit it to you, to be used as you will.
We pray for wise administration, and good stewardship
that our Commitment for Life will be life giving,
for partners across this world. Amen.*

Diana Cullum-Hall