

Wisdom in our attitude to what we have.

James 5:1-6 Reflective worship 01/08/21

As the week and the sermon writing have progressed I have become increasingly aware that there are few empirically right or wrong answers in our attitude to what we have. It is something hard to talk about without sounding either hypocritical or sanctimonious. So it is not surprising that it's all around us and that in many of the conversations we do sound either hypocritical or sanctimonious.

You turn on the television and find they are showing 'Downton Abbey' (for the fourth time?) and much of the talk is of having sufficient wealth to keep the estate running. You pick up a book and find that many pages in 'The Mirror and the Light' involve Thomas Cromwell deciding how to disperse property be it jewels, family estates or dissolved monastic houses. The post brings exhortations to buy stuff that you simply must have. You cannot be a proper person without their products.

There is a long tradition of measuring people by what they have. I read a wonderful verse in Jeremiah this week – 'Must you prove your rank among kings by competing with them in cedar? Bigger. Better than yours.'

James warns that wealth decays. Stores of food rot over time. Artifacts are devalued by changes in fashion. Property needs maintenance. As financial institutions love to remind us 'the value of investments can fall as well as rise'.

So, when James warns the rich of impending miseries is he telling us to rush out tomorrow and give everything away? Actually, no he isn't. He is encouraging us to think about what we have, how we acquired it and what we do with it.

There is nothing wrong with payments received for honest toil. We are increasingly aware that levels of pay do not necessarily reflect the value to society of the recipient's work and James would not criticise someone in receipt of the going rate for the job. But what if the job is illegal, immoral or the payment method unjust? Our parish supports the Adavu charity run by the Methodist church which in its turn supports the victims of modern-day slavery. Often these are people who are given their fare to Britain along with promises of big earnings only to find that they are tied to that original 'employer' until they have repaid the cost of their fare, and because rates of pay are actually low that becomes impossible.

None of us is likely to inherit Downton Abbey but in a mainly affluent area like Solihull I am confident that much thought is given to inheritance, in particular how to reduce inheritance tax liability. Are clever tax avoidance dodges the way that the Christian community should be heading?

I was brought up in a house where buying a raffle ticket was considered to be rampant gambling – even when the most you could win was a box of chocolates. That attitude to gambling probably should be regarded as over the top but where do we stand on acquiring wealth at the expense of others, where the effect of losing can have such a significant impact on other people's lives?

Should we be buying clothes or other goods produced by workers on subsistence wages in countries where there is no concept of minimum wage. And how do we know which clothes are and which aren't? A high-priced product is no guarantee that the people who made it were well paid.

In March last year large chunks of the economy froze overnight as lock down took hold. It was easy to rejoice in the cleaner air as commercial flying all but stopped, but the knock on was large numbers

of staff heading for redundancy, businesses rocking financially and for thwarted holiday makers money stashed away for for what?

Whether we like it or not the world economy now depends on money circulating. Buying stuff creates manufacturing jobs, earnings create tax revenue, tax revenue supports national projects like the NHS and benefit systems. But we can spend wisely. Clothes can be made from organic cotton rather than products based on fossil fuels. Unwanted clothes donated to charity shops where they generate further revenue for a specific cause, as well as clothing some people who cannot afford to shop elsewhere. Apparently, there are already enough clothes in the world at present to clothe the next six generations.

How we chose to spend on food influences farming decisions with a knock on effect on the environment. Some of the very rich choose to use their wealth to support vaccination or family planning programmes in countries where levels of health care are poor. Surely this is what James would advocate. I have difficulty getting my head around billionaire trips into space.

Like the billionaires we can spend on personal pleasure. There is no question that a few treats can be good for our wellbeing. A frugal life is often lauded, but is that so desirable if it is only to build up a miser's pot to be used - when? Prudent planning for the future is surely a different matter. We must all make our own decisions on how we spend.

While the parish office has been closed our front step became a repository for Christmas gifts for the Adavu clients and more recently toiletries. Some people knock and chat. Often bags are simply left. Not everything comes from our own congregation – some is from friends or friends of friends. The same people bring again in response to each fresh request. Generosity is alive and well in Shirley.

But not everything we have is tangible. Not everything can be totted up by the accountants and seen by the taxman. We have so much more that we can use and share to help ourselves and each other. My experience of church people is that most are shy of revealing their skills – yes, we all know an exception. But for every person keen to tell you about their skills there is an army of others who think they may not be good enough, or who are frightened of spoiling things if they make a mistake.

We all have skills, skills that can be used to help others. Sometimes we are not aware of what we are capable of and need that nudge from others telling us to give it a go. Our talent may be to sit and listen, to smile and welcome people, to keep calm in a crisis. It could be to support others as they take on more high profile tasks.

James advises us to build our treasure not of earthly things but of those things that really matter. He warns us to be humble in all things, not just in respect of wealth. I had a salutary experience of this. 'Granny', asked our about to start school grandson, 'What do one and four make?' I've passed a few maths exams over the years and felt very confident as I answered, 'Five'. He gave me a withering look and sighed. 'No Granny. One and four make fourteen'.

I want to end rather bizarrely by quoting a Christmas carol – apologies to those of you who find this difficult in August – but it seems to echo the sentiment of James.

What can I give him, poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb;

If I were a wise man I would do my part

Yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

We are going to pause now to have an opportunity to think about our own attitudes to what we have – tangible and intangible. It really is up to us to make our own decisions.