

Owe ?

18 12 16

God our redeemer,
who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary
to be the mother of your Son:
grant that, as she looked for the coming of our saviour,
so we may be ready to greet him
when he comes again as our judge.

Our text may be found in today's gospel from St Luke, chapter 7 and verse 42:

'When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt for both of them.'

How much do you owe ? Not a polite question to ask, is it ? Personal, individual debt seems a fact of contemporary life so I guess it should have come as no surprise at the end of last month when The Guardian ran an article on the record level of personal debt, a seven year high, which was then picked up on Radio 4. The figure that shocked me was £1.25 billion on credit cards, loans and overdrafts. If we were to include mortgages, then the figure hits a colossal £1.45 trillion which means that, on average, each adult in the UK owes £28,489 !

So, today, the fourth Sunday in Advent and for my fourth sponsored sermon which with the other three has raised 200€ for church funds, I'd like to look at the thorny problem of debt.

HP – hire purchase – was a fact of life for my parents. Then came credit cards when I was a student at university. And I made a simple decision then that I've always stuck to – pay off what I owe at the end of each month thereby avoiding interest charges ! Then there was the mortgage I had for 25 years on a semi-detached on the edge of London. Now I'm a pensioner in credit !

But debt is not just material and financial but is also personal. Debt is what we owe to our parents, friends and family. Debt is what we owe to our country and to our neighbours. And, of course, debt is what we owe to our God, our creator and redeemer, our teacher, friend and saviour.

And, in today's gospel, we have Luke's account of a woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears and drying them with her hair and anointing them with a costly, perfumed, foot cream. In John's gospel, it takes place in Bethany and the woman involved was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. In Luke's gospel, it is in Galilee in the house of Simon the Pharisee and the unnamed woman of loose virtue might be, according to Pope Gregory the Great, Mary Magdalene. But whoever she is, don't you love her courage, her prodigal expression of what she feels for Jesus as a result of a life-changing God-encounter through him.

Shock ! Horror !! Scandal !!! Jesus, a rabbi, has allowed himself to be touched by a woman. Not only that but by a woman of the street, by a prostitute. But Jesus challenges the Pharisees' prejudice by telling them a simple parable which is at the heart of our sermon today: Two debtors; two debts; one creditor. One owes 500 denarii; the other 50. Neither man has the money pay off the debt so the

creditor cancels both men's debts. And the simple question that Jesus asks Simon: **'Which of them will love him more ?'**

There we have it. We owe God more than we can ever pay him back. But God loves us enough to excuse our debts to him. But, as ever, I will say there is a choice. There's no compulsion. The prodigal son chose to come home. The unnamed woman in today's gospel chose to express her love and gratitude by what she did at Jesus' feet. But we don't have to accept God's forgiveness. We can ignore our very real debt to him.

So let me leave you with this question: 'Are we open-minded enough, sufficiently mentally flexible and spiritually awake to be able to respond to God's offer of having our debts cancelled ?' There is the chance of being forgiven but can we, will we take it ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 35 :Owe

