

Today marks the start of our annual stewardship campaign, and many of you will have got a letter from me in the post this week about that. If you didn't, there are some at the back. I don't want anyone to feel left out. So today is a day that I have to talk on the important subject of money, and I'm emboldened by this by the fact that Jesus talked more about money and finance than any other subject. 11 of his 39 parables were about money, so he didn't have any of the squeamishness that I feel when the subject comes up. 15% of Jesus's teaching was on the subject of money, and I was given a gift today in the gospel reading, which is part of that 15% with Jesus talking about taxes. His enemies come to him with a trick question and in answer to them, Jesus makes it quite clear that we are required to pay taxes, to render to Caesar the things that are due to Caesar.

And I'm not going to say much more about the gospel reading other than to go on and answer the question of how Christian stewardship is different to the paying of taxes. I can think of two important ways they're different. Firstly, taxes aren't negotiable. We don't decide how much we would like to give the government from year to year. They tell us. That amount is set for us. Although I did hear of one exception of a very rich man, and in midlife, he became a Christian and he wrote to the IRS and said, "I've become a Christian. My conscience has been stirred. I feel guilty about the fact for years I've been involved in a tax avoidance scheme. So please find enclosed a check for \$250,000. Yours sincerely, blah, blah, blah. P.S. If I still feel guilty, I'll pass on the rest."

Most of us don't decide what we pay in tax, but we do decide what amount and percentage of our income we'll give away. Last week I was talking on the subject of values, and I ended with a challenge that we write a list of our top five values. And I have another challenge this week, which actually might be a dangerous exercise. I invite you to write next to those top five values the amount of time and money that we put into those things we've identified as our top five values. We might find if

we're really valuing the things that we want to be valuing.

I asked that question of the church budget when I was preparing the sermon this week, and it's clear when one looks at the church budget that we value people. A very high percentage of our income goes towards paying our staff team. That team is very talented and very stable. The team's the same size as when I arrived seven years ago, but it costs us a lot more money to pay them, not just because staff costs, as all costs, have gone up, but also that we've chosen to invest in our staff and our people because we value them.

And I was thinking about my wonderful colleague, Christina, who's still away in London this week. There's very, very few churches, Episcopal churches in our diocese, who could have afforded to take on a newly ordained person. But those of you who know her, I'm sure will think of what a wonderful investment that was and how we've seen her blossom over her time with us. It's clear from our budget too that we value music, and work with children, and outreach, and actually nearly 20% of our income goes outside the parish. 10% to the diocese, which is a tax, and almost another 10% which we give to our various partner organizations and people we've invested in and worked with over the years.

The second way that Christian stewardship is different to the payment of taxes is that we give to God joyfully. You might be the exception, but actually I've never met anybody who pays their taxes joyfully. St. Paul says in Corinthians, "God loves a cheerful giver," and the word he uses there for cheerful is *hilaron*, from which we get the word *hilarious*. God loves a *hilarious* giver. To use the word that comes up in our reading from Philippians, "We give rejoicing." G.K. Chesterton said, "Faith might be defined as the power which makes us joyful about the things that matter. Fashionable frivolity might be defined as the power which makes us sad about the things that do not matter."

We can give joyfully to God because we know what matters. We give to what matters because as people of faith, we know that everything comes from God. All good things come from God. It's all gift. We're a grateful people and our stewardship campaign this year is rooted in gratitude. We do everything, as St. Paul says, with thanksgiving. We say every week, "All things come from you, O Lord, and of your own have we given you." We are giving back what is already God's. And it's liberating to discover that everything belongs to God and that we don't actually own anything. We are merely stewards of what God has given us, because if we think that we own our wealth, the irony is that it will end up owning us. By being thankful for all that we've been given, by being generous with what we've been given, we can come to live a life full of gratitude.

There was once a little boy who got his hands stuck in a very expensive antique vase, and his parents couldn't get it out. They tried everything, soap, the lot. So they said, "Right, well, that's it. We're going to have to smash the vase. We'll have one more go." So, they said to the boy, "Johnny, we're going to have one more go. Can you straighten your fingers?" He said, "Well, I can't do that because then I'd lose hold of the penny."

Giving out of gratitude means that we don't hold tightly to the material things that we are blessed with in life. There's a very rich banker in England called Jonathan Ruffer, and he made the news a few years ago because, for reasons which are too complex to explain, he gave the Church of England 12 magnificent paintings by the Spanish painter Zurbarán. Anyway, he said it was easy for him to be generous because he knew that money can poison you. He said, "It's like the digestive system. Money is meant to flow through you. It's not meant to stop flowing." Mr. Ruffer is a hilarious giver who gives out of gratitude.

And I want to end by going back to that passage from Philippians. I was very taken with what St. Paul says about the peace of God guarding your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Remember, Paul's in prison when he's writing this letter. He's

surrounded by Roman guards watching over him. So perhaps it's not surprising that he used that imagery. But it raises the question of who is guarding our hearts and minds? I think that when Paul encourages his readers to think about that which is true, honorable, just, pure, and pleasing, he's reinforcing his point about saying, "Don't let bad and negative things pollute and corrupt your heart and your mind."

Who or what is standing guard over our heart and mind? Who do you think is keeping you safe and secure? Even as the people of God, we can find putting our trust in material things rather than God and his peace. So there's another question for us to consider in this season of stewardship. As well as reflecting on how and what we do with our time and our treasure reveals our values, we can think also about the guard around our heart and our mind. Are we trusting in God's peace? Amen.