

What do you spend most of your time thinking about? What you're going to eat next? The person you love? Work, leisure? There's an urban myth that grown men think about something every 9 seconds which is unmentionable in this situation! Now you'll be delighted to know that some recent research – not on me I may add – has proved that men only think about that 19 times a day – much more reasonable – perhaps!

But, you know, I think that I think about money more than anything else; I suspect we all think about money for quite a lot of the time.

Last week, for instance, I was in meetings in the Cathedral and a three day meeting in the diocese and at both a great deal of the time was spent thinking about money – that basically we haven't got enough of it and so where are we going to get the money from to do the things that we have to do or want to do. And it's dreadful when you have to think about money that much, it's traumatising, soul destroying - literally.

I've a great sense of affinity with your patron, St Matthew, whose feast day and hence your Patronal Festival we're celebrating today. It's really lovely being with you and great to be able to celebrate this feast properly. My point of connection with Matthew is that before I went off to Mirfield to train to be a priest I was a door-to-door rent collector. I had three council estates in Wellingborough to look after and I simply had to go round and collect the rents and then deal with the arrears. That was my job.

I was only young, that's why the church had decided I needed to go to work before I began my training. And I'm glad that I did. I realised as I met people struggling with debt, balancing a meagre budget, risking their home in order to buy food for the kids, that not everyone lived as we lived at home, that a lot of people had real money worries.

The Lord called me away from rent collecting and he called Matthew away from the tax booth. I suppose that as nice as I tried to be, not everyone liked me when I was 'the running rent man' as they called me. We know not everyone liked Matthew, the tax collector.

The thing about tax collectors in Matthew's day was that they were colluding with the Roman occupying authorities, they were doing a lot of their dirty work – quislings if you like. And to make it worse the Tax Collector would add on an extra tax for themselves, they were embezzlers, swindlers – they were despised people in their communities who got their hands and their souls dirty with money.

The writer of the book of Proverbs points us away from silver and gold to something much more valuable – to the wisdom of God. At a similar time a Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus wrote

'Wealth consists not in having great possessions but in having few wants.'

There's a great deal of truth in that. True wealth does come through realising what's of true worth and pursuing that in life, in really valuing what really matters and not being seduced by the things that everyone else says that you need in order to be happy, we know all of that.

And I know all of that and of course it just makes me feel guiltier because there are things that I still want, things that I think that I need in order to make life better. I still think about and worry about money, my own, the Cathedral's, the diocese's. I need to be truly liberated as Jesus liberated Matthew; I need to free my vision

'The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers' says Paul to the Christians in Corinth. They were in a really wealthy place, a trading city, a successful place and the early Christians were as caught up in the financial wheeling and dealing as anyone else. Paul was calling them away, as Jesus called Matthew away, from the things that can absorb and distract to something of much more importance.

It's interesting that in fact money has become in many ways the 'God of this world' as Paul describes it. Since the banking crisis of 2008 the news has been taken over with one crisis after another, one horrendous tale of debt after another. The people of Greece are paying a heavy price as are the people of Ireland and Portugal and Spain and of course here, with the whole emphasis on austerity, there are parts of our communities in which the reality of the economic downturn has seriously affected people's ability to live. No wonder we're obsessed with money.

When the Occupy movement landed outside St Paul's last autumn we were all divided in our opinions about their tactics. But I think that many people had sympathy with their initial message – banks and financiers must not become the de facto government, they must not determine the future of our global community – there's still something called democracy and it's not right that those least able to pay the price of the actions of others – the often greedy and corrupt actions of others – are required to pay the price for it.

Matthew was liberated from his passion for money and his life was turned round and he became passionate for Jesus and for the Good News. We too need to be liberated from living in awe of money to having a healthy relationship with it and having an even healthier relationship with our God.

In Matthew's Gospel we're given the Sermon on the Mount and at the heart of that Sermon is the passage about the lilies of the field and how God provides all they need and more and will provide for us. You know that passage well. It's about getting your values and your life in proper order and a proper balance; it's about living responsibly with possessions, with needs and with God.

Christians are not called to be irresponsible where money is concerned but we are called to have a healthy relationship with it, to live within our means, to live knowing the value of gold and the value of wisdom, the value of life and the value of God. We're called to true stewardship of all that's been given to us – money and time and talents – and to share all we have of each with each other. And we're called to make sure that the values we have as individuals become the values we have as a society.

What do you spend most of your time thinking about? You can't ignore money but don't ignore God in the process. God calls us and liberates us as he called and liberated your patron and provides for us because God loves us – sinners and fallen and distracted and silly and annoying as we can be.

And God teaches us true value by giving himself to us – totally – body and blood, in this Eucharist, in the Mass, day in, day out – to make us a sacrificial, generous, life giving, life enhancing community. If you want to think about anything, think about God.

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