

Depressing but encouraging

John 12.1-8 / Luke 22.24-27

On Friday or Saturday, I hear a noisy package come through the letterbox. It is what we have always referred to in our house as 'my comic'. But this is not the Beano or the Dandy, but the Church Times. But 'comic' is not really a good description. Quite often it makes me want to cry rather than laugh. Week after week there are reports of clergy and other church people being accused of wrongdoing of one sort or another. Week after week there are reports of good Christian folk disagreeing, not in some gentle way, but in ways which are utterly divisive and abhorrent. It sometimes sounds more like Trump and Zelinsky in the Oval Office than Christians discussing. So today's Gospel story is both depressing and encouraging. What it tells me is that things were ever thus. It may not be good – that is depressing, but at least we know we are not alone in our problems, and maybe that is encouraging. We heard about Judas Iscariot objecting to Mary using a precious ointment to anoint Jesus. Now I know it was because it was because he was on the make, and used their common funds for his own purposes. Again, it reminds me as I read about 'bad apples' in today's church that there was a bad apple in the group of disciples. One out of twelve is a higher percentage than we are coping with today. But we don't read that the rest of the disciples rounded on him. So here is one example of there being a disagreement amongst Jesus' closest circle. And we read in Acts of another time when the misuse of money was dividing the Christian community. Or we could go to Luke Chapter 22 and read "an argument broke out among the disciples as to which of them should be thought of as the greatest." So let's get away from any thought that these twelve were jolly good friends who were always on the best of terms. Quite clearly they weren't.

But just think about the two issues that those two incidents are about. One is about money, and the other is about power. Today we have Christians continuing to be at odds over those two things. There has been all sorts of debates in General Synod, most of which I don't fully understand, about how money is allocated to Dioceses. Should central funds go primarily to individual parishes, and to maintaining a Christian presence in every parish, or should they go to schemes which emanate from the top, and stem from a managerial model of church which says that the people at the top know best. It happens at parish level too. Fortunately I had very few heated discussions at the PCC in my last parish – but the ones I did have were about money. I arrived there in 1997 to a situation in which – believe it or not – we had about a quarter of a million pounds in the parish account. That

was more than the Diocese of Manchester had in their account at the time. But the entire office equipment amounted to two rather rusty filing cabinets. I persuaded them that a computer and printer and photocopier were kind of normal in the late 20th century. But soon there came a point at which I was told – no more of these newfangled gadgets. I nearly got to the point of resigning when they wanted to reduce the outward giving to the worldwide church and to secular charities from the 10% that had been agreed. The reason was that it might mean that the reserves in the parish accounts might fall below their ‘safe cushion’ of £120,000. Having served in parishes where if we were simply in the black at the end of the year we were delighted, I found that very hard to cope with. I stood my ground, and at least during my time the outward giving level didn’t change. But what PCCs spend time debating is so often about what to buy or whatever, rather than the task of living and spreading the Gospel. I recall as a curate fifty odd years ago how my fellow curate, with all the brashness of youth, raised at the PCC what he called ‘the lack of spirituality in the parish,’ That got, as I recall, about five minutes of discussion. We then went on to spend half an hour or so debating how many and what kind of cups and saucers we should buy. That was a real sense of good priorities! Have times changed? I don’t know. Money in itself isn’t a problem. It is how people deal with it which potentially is a minefield. As Paul wrote to Timothy – “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith.” Then let’s think about the other issue that divided the disciples – status and power. When I read the reports from the last General Synod, and the documents which were circulated to its members, I found lots of instances of people exercising, or trying to exercise power. It may be groups who have a particular view on an issue – or it may be those who by the nature of things have some power – the officials, or indeed the Bishops. And people are loath to relinquish power. One of the topics which burnt most fiercely at the recent Synod was about how Safeguarding should be managed. The proposal to put it totally in the hands of people independent of the church was not passed, although it was what various reports, the lead Bishop on the issue, and others with some clout were in favour. One power group within the church has set up a fund for parishes to contribute to instead of to their diocesan fund, if they don’t agree with what the Bishop or Diocese decides. “Donations (from parishes) can be earmarked for particular churches and ministries (which are signed up to this group’s basis). Because of course money and power often go hand in hand. Power may make some people wealthy, and but also money can give people power that otherwise they would not merit. Would Elon Musk have the power he appears to have if he were not such a wealthy man? And in general terms in the church, there is much more management from above which parishes have to cope with than when I was first an incumbent. Again, bringing it parish level, powerful individuals, wealthy individuals, and powerful groups can make life very difficult. I recall going on holiday and finding that the local church, at the time when Alternative Services were being

introduced, had had a complete set of 1662 Prayer Books provided by the Lord of the Manor. Power was being exercised! And as a Rural Dean, I had to go twice to a PCC where a power group was making life impossible for the perfectly competent, but young and green Vicar. Fortunately I didn't have to say anything – but when I was there, they didn't make trouble in the way they usually did. I think I prevented a clerical breakdown which was looming. It had got to the point where the clergyman in question never answered his phone. He always waited to see what the message left was and then rang back.

But let's not get away with simply thinking about 'them'. What about us? We may not be multimillionaires. We may not be people with immense power in the land, or indeed in the church. But in some way or other, we do have money, we do have power, we do have influence. We can use those things for good, or for things which are not so good. Within communities, within families, people misuse money, and exercise power in negative ways. Bullying occurs not only in school playgrounds, but offices and semi-detached houses.

So reading about the tensions among the disciples about power and money is depressing, as reading the Church Times can be. But as well as affirming that sadly they were just like us in our failures to live as Christians should, there is also the encouragement that despite all this, these were the people who brought the message of Jesus to the world. If it were not for those fractious twelve (or eleven of them anyway) we would not be here today. It reminds us that God uses ordinary people like them, and like us, with all our weaknesses. The Gospel thrives sometimes because of what we do, and sometimes – perhaps more often - despite what we do. What a relief it is to know that. May we seek the grace of God to use whatever wealth and power we have in ways which commend him. It is our choice. We have power. That is human power.

Lent begins with the story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. Three of those were quite plainly about the misuse of power – turning stones into bread and so on. We follow Jesus in any way in which we avoid misusing power. Like him we are called to be vulnerable. But on Passion Sunday we are reminded that his vulnerability, which led to the cross, resulted in the most wonderful expression of God's power when death is conquered, the curtain of the temple is torn in two and we are reconciled to God. That is God's power, and we are called, in all our weakness and vulnerability to share it in whatever we can. Pilate asks Jesus 'Do you not know I have power to release and power to crucify you?' But Jesus says to him 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.' We have power – but it is God's power, not ours. The question always is 'How do we use it?'