

The mysterious power of money lies in the fact that it is basically sacramental in its nature. It is a sign that partakes of the thing that it signifies. Coins are not just tokens of wealth, they are actual wealth - as long as the Sovereign remains sovereign. So in any Kingdom the question of how we spend our money, is always part of the bigger question of how we are spending our very lives.

On a November Evening twelve months ago, in the shadow of Armistice Day, and in the middle of Coronation Street, war somewhat predictably broke out. Specifically the Christmas Advert War, between the big high street names that every year battle for our custom between Remembrance Day and the anniversary of the official declaration of Peace on Earth, and Goodwill to all humankind.

Very probably you will have either seen or read about Sainsbury's beautifully shot, unimaginably expensive WWI 'Christmas is for sharing' ad which aired for the first time this time last year. A stunning 3 min 20 second imagining of the momentary cessation of hostilities that reputedly brought British and German soldiers out of their trenches to exchange kindness and express their common humanity on Christmas Day in no-mans land in 1914.

You also very probably formulated an opinion about this controversial bit of marketing. And you would not be alone. Most commentators saw it simply as a massive counter-offensive against John Lewis' recent capturing of the market for moving vignettes with movie quality production values. Some characterised the Sainsbury's offering as a "stirring memorial based on lots of historical research." Whilst others complained it was a "dangerous and disrespectful masterpiece" "exploiting the memory of the War". The most cynical even saw a subliminal reference to Sainsbury's own entrenched position with regard to *their* German Competitors - Lidl and Aldi.

But it was Rory Sutherland, vice-chairman of the ubiquitous marketing consultants the Ogilvy Group UK, whose comments got right to the heart of the question "There's always going to be a certain number who feel you're using millions of deaths to "sell wrapping paper", he said. "But most people will like it. Because it sells 'the spirit of Christmas'".

Of course, if most people like it, and everyone is talking about it, then it doesn't matter much to an advertiser what the rights and wrongs might be. But what was interesting about the criticism of that advert was that, in fact, the thing people objected to most was the commodifying of sacrifice, or of the triumph of kindness over inhumanity, or of our memories - the turning of these things of incalculable value, into products, to which a price tag and a Christmas label could be attached. Yet this is the process that *all* our advertising depends on. Selling the spirit of *something*. Bottling, labelling and marketing the things we legitimately crave, but cannot reliably secure: love, family, happiness, peace, joy. As any of *this* year's Christmas ads will tell you - Sainsbury's, John Lewis et al, started selling us this stuff in the form of consumables and brands a long time before that fateful episode of Coronation Street.

Today however - as Trinity season moves us ever closer to Year's End, and the prospect of a final reckoning looms, when that which is of lasting worth will be separated out from all that is not - our texts challenge us to live by a completely different set of values, in a radically altered economy, which has as little place for sales and manipulation, as it does for warfare and coercion. Or for any human notion of winning.

Like a staggering proportion of Jesus' teaching - our Gospel this morning is about stuff. And what stuff is really for. And it is also, less obviously, about conflict - about victory, defeat and reconciliation, in the light of Isaiah's vision, and St Paul's admonition... And whilst our Market Leaders are busily turning the idea of peace into cold hard cash, Jesus sets about flipping that notion on its head, by turning money back into a token of something infinitely valuable, and reminding anyone who will listen, how simply paying attention to a *coin* can reveal the true *cornerstone* of human identity and society...

For all that the first coins and counters were most likely cows and cowry shells - and currency as we know it is probably no older than 5 or 6 centuries before Christ, money in its root form, has been around as long as there have been people.

Its standard definition is that it is "the common Medium of Exchange, whose most important and essential function is as a 'measure of value'". That is usually taken to mean money is the medium - the thing that stands in for other things which might be exchanged - goats or spades or grain - so that exchange can happen even where needs are not perfectly matched.

But in fact, money is a medium in a more primary sense than that. It is the consummate example of the stuff that enables any exchange to happen between people. Because exchange - giving and receiving - and the relationship that is woven by it - requires material - a medium in which to take place. And that, though we are supremely capable of ignoring it, is what money is first and foremost. A substantial symbol. A medium of exchange. The fabric of relationship.

It was once explained to me by a more natural economist than I am ever going to be, in terms of the role of a ball in a game like the football that reputedly brought broke out in no mans land that Christmas.

There, the ball is the medium of exchange which allows the game to take place. It is not the only thing the game depends on. A meeting place is required for it to happen; both a separation, and a coming together of at least two persons...But without the medium of exchange, without the ball, there is no game.

Just as the game is not about either one side or the other, is not the property of one side or the other, but depends on the mutuality of both - so relationship is not about one party or the other, in fact as soon as it becomes so, the whole exercise collapses. And just as the give and take of the game relies on a token of itself - something by definition not the exclusive property of either side - passing back and forth between both, so the give and take of relationship requires a mediation - something distinct from each person - which nonetheless can weave them together...

And it is in *this* context of mediation that Jesus takes a coin to reconfigure the whole question set before him, by introducing the word our translators render as... well, render.

Apodidomi. To give up, give over, to give back, to restore, to return.

The whole point of the thing you hold in your hand, he says. Is that it is currency. It is given and given back. Not so that you don't have it, and someone else does, but so that in the giving up and restoring, the receiving and rendering, a relationship is fostered... That is why some of you might be loathe to engage in that exchange with Caesar.

Because money has always *been* a medium of relationship, it's just that in the Divine Economy, it - and all the material goods it betokens - was never intended to be anything *other* than a medium of relationship.

By this token, of course, storing up money or goods, refusing to part with them, is as nonsensical as a footballer simply storing up footballs. It is a complete distortion of the purpose and value of the medium. And sacrificing relationship, in order to have more of the fabric relationship is woven out of, is the height of absurdity.

In fact, the real problems come when we start thinking of the coins or the cows as 'ours' - as belonging to us, as opposed to belonging to the one who inaugurated the economy they embody. In the case of the Emperor, the Empire, but in the case of the Creator, the whole creation - Emperor, Empire and Exchequer included.

According to the scriptures (at least half of) Jesus' questioners knew by heart, the intention behind the creation of things in the first place, and more importantly, behind the creation of the people into whose hands those things were entrusted, was always that every thing could be taken up, and given its fullest value, by becoming the very stuff in which love consists - by becoming part of the continual process we celebrate in every Eucharist: not of production, sale, purchase and ownership, not of taking and losing, but of *gift* - of receiving, enhancing, and giving away.

But the reductive economies 'whose God is their belly' - whose focus is consumption - whose interest is only in 'earthly things', not the 'conversation' for which they are the medium, inevitably treat objects as having no significance beyond themselves, so that the image inscribed on them, though it is the very definition of their value, becomes invisible or irrelevant. And what is worse - those who treat *objects* this way, will inevitably treat *people* in turn, as more objects to be belt-fed through machines, as if human life did not bear the image of God, and human bodies were always destined to end as just so many spent shells.

The antidote to such a poisonous value system, however, does not lie in despising material things - Jesus makes that manifest - but in considering, and using them, aright. Simply because *we* are material - but material stamped with the image of the Triune God, and called by Love to draw all matter into a relationship *of* love, with Love...

So while we are busily dividing things and people into good and bad, winners and losers, secular and sacred, heads and tails, Jesus is advocating a radically different approach - of treating things and people sacramentally, as if they both carried the image of the divine life, and could become part of its economy,

That is the other side of all our coins.

On the other side of the Denarius Jesus asks for, the inverse of Caesar's image was the image of Pax the goddess of peace. And in Christ it is true that the answer to their question - to all our dilemmas of domination and submission - to all our oppositions and divisions *is* Peace - the final triumph of relationship and love over conflict and violence

But not the peace that might be sought in abandoning desire or foreswearing material goods. The kingdom not of this world, Jesus came proclaiming, isn't immaterial - it is of a different order. It is the vision of Isaiah that defies all our standard 'survival-of-the-fittest', 'free market', 'food chain' oppositions of hunter and prey...victor and vanquished... It is the realm in which (the material is taken up in the spiritual and) the wolf lies down with the lamb.

It is not the Pax Romana - predicated on power or pecking order.
But the Pax Vobis of the one who in rendering himself as God to men, and as man to God, embodies the Eternal Economy.

It is not the *temporary* cessation of hostilities, that allows you to keep your stuff and me mine, but the only eternal kind of peace, that consists in constant mutual self gift.

We might repeatedly turn money into a symbol and vehicle for conflict, but our Redeemer insists on making even the currency of the old economy speak of the new - so that we might recognise the danger of clinging on to the medium of relationship, and losing hold of relationship itself; so that we might avoid in so doing, completely missing out, not just whole the point of creation - of life - but on what is most extraordinary about the Gospel of its redemption, and what is so radical about the call thus extended to us:

Because in the end God was so determined that we should *not* lose the Giver, in our fixation on the gift, that he made *himself* the medium of exchange. *He became* the meeting place, and - as we are about to commemorate - the object that is placed into our hands; something that *could* be valued against coins, even handed over for them. So that the NT would finally say, 'there is only one mediator between God and humankind' - the man Christ Jesus - and so that we could be invited to enter *into* that mediation, by making our own lives - as the Body of Christ - the medium for relationship between God, and all those to whom He extends grace and peace; by becoming part of that mysterious exchange and most Holy Communion, in which all things are finally reconciled.

The thing that makes the story of Xmas - and even the stories of Sainsbury's and John Lewis' Christmas *adverts*, so powerful is that in each this process is manifest. Love is embodied in an object, and then in the miraculous economy of gift, that object is turned, by being given away, into more abundant love - alive in a way that continually overflows its bounds, to reconcile those previously held apart from one another.

This is what we call Eucharist. The tragedy would be if we allowed these eternal things to be, not *embodied* in gift as they must be, but sold to us as products as they can seem to be; if we were to hold onto the medium of love, instead of offering it in thanksgiving and lifting up Love itself; if we were to fail to hear the real question that will be asked of us all in the final accounting: When the trumpet sounds - not just, "What have you done with your money?", but "What have you done with your lives?"