

Rev. John and His Wonky Bishop

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It was a Wednesday evening in a made up parish, and Rev. John, a fictional Vicar was sitting in his local pub (this pub is also entirely imaginary). Rev. John rarely got to his local, because his evenings were usually taken up with PCC meetings, Deanery meetings, Mission meetings, Baptism meetings, Wedding meetings, Funeral meetings and meetings to arrange meetings. Tonight he was meeting no-one. It was just him and his Wonky Bishop (his favourite made up beer). He very much enjoyed his own company and was engrossed in absolutely nothing. He was concentrating on idleness and focussing on the absence of anything to do, which was an activity he treasured.

But then, edging closer and closer, stealthily, like a cheetah in the long grass, belly to the floor, slowly closing down the distance, was a thought demanding his attention. The thought was a conversation he'd overheard after the Sunday service. He'd just preached on the parable of the prodigal son and specifically on the challenge of forgiveness. This wasn't just about coming home and celebration, but about repentance and reformation; the difficulty of acceptance and restoration, and how difficult it is when we are the other son, the one who hadn't been partying and bingeing but diligently serving our father. Rev. John had raised some very tough challenges to the congregation and was half expecting some flack over coffee.

To his surprise, he overheard people praising his sermon. Mary, never one to keep her opinions to herself, was telling Natalie from youth group that the sermon had really made her think. "Do you know I realised today that I'm the older son in the story? I don't half hate it when someone gets something for free that I've worked hard for." Rev. John was amazed.

What crowded his thoughts as he brooded over his pint, was that this challenging sermon *hadn't* been criticised, when his sermon a few weeks ago *had*. It made no sense. He'd recently preached on an earlier chapter from Luke, about when Jesus went to have dinner at a Pharisee's house. Rev. John had highlighted the last bit;

"The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbours, the kind of people who will return the favour. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You'll be—and experience—a blessing. They won't be able to return the favour, but the favour will be returned—oh, how it will be returned!—at the resurrection of God's people."

He'd talked about the importance of being generous, and not just that, but thinking outside the box when it comes to generosity. Not just doing the routine, the things we do as a duty or because we want to or because we know we'll be repaid in some way. He'd preached about Jesus' message being about going above and beyond with our generosity, and how we should give without thought for repayment or acknowledgement in *this* lifetime. We had to have faith in God, who knows about our generosity, which will be repaid **'at the resurrection of the righteous'**.

Rev. John had put an awful lot of work into this sermon, consulting lots of texts, praying about it, and practising it. He knew it was theologically sound, and, though he'd never say so, he knew it was a quality sermon. And so he was ill-prepared for the reaction of his much-loved church family. They didn't even wait until coffee. He was accosted in the aisle during the peace. One angry gentleman,

whilst holding firmly onto his hand after the obligatory “And also with you,” told him that he considered himself to be a very generous person thank-you-very-much, and that Rev. John should think twice before preaching to them about giving. This is a church after all.

Rev. John had also been chest poked as parishioners left, and even his Warden took him to one side.

“Thing is old chap, church just isn’t the place to be asking us to be more generous.”

Rev John bit his lip. He hated confrontation.

“We already *are* generous, so you really shouldn’t be preaching to us about it.”

John was perplexed. In other areas people seemed so willing to grow in faith and to be challenged. I know I’m loved by God, he thought, but I can’t hear *that* enough. Why is it, he wondered, that I can preach on God’s forgiveness of our sins time after time, and no-one ever comes up to me and says “Now just a minute, I’ve already heard you say that I’m forgiven and so I don’t think I need to hear *another* sermon on it!”? Or “I already love my neighbours enough. I have no capacity to learn anything new about this or love them any more than I already do. I’ve peaked. ”

This wasn’t what his parish was like at all! His parishioners were not just willing, but eager to follow Jesus and be transformed. They were loving people wanting to show more love. Kind people wanting to grow in kindness. John wondered if he was missing something. Why did people so hate hearing about generosity, and especially money? Jesus did it all the time. Hmmm. Maybe that was the answer, John thought. Maybe Jesus mentioned money so often *because* he knew people needed to hear it. Was there something spiritually significant about our bond with our possessions? Do we struggle to listen to sermons about being generous because we know we find it hard? Is this why we feel personally affronted? Why, when we hear Jesus telling us to love our enemies do we think of all those we should get on better with, but, when we hear about giving generously we think ok *now* you’re getting too personal?

John wondered whether the answer could be that we fear money and its power. How could we be set free from that fear? He was brooding intensely on this as he stood waiting for his second Wonky Bishop. His thoughts were only broken when the bar tender said “£2.30 please,” and he reached into his trouser pocket and realised with great embarrassment that he hadn’t enough to pay. He was about to apologise when a man on his left leaned over and handed the bar tender a fiver. “A pint of bitter, and the rest is for the Vicar’s pint.” He winked at Rev. John. It was the old man who’d grumbled at him in the aisle in church. “How’s that for generosity?”

Rev. John’s parishioners *were* a generous lot. They just hated hearing about it. Perhaps he would never understand why people, including himself, felt so strongly about money, from embarrassment (like just now) to outrage, to resentment, to a sense of power. “Do we control money or does money control us?” he wondered, as he sipped his favourite made-up beer in his entirely fictional local pub. “Definitely something to pray about,” he thought.

And that’s where we leave the imaginary Rev. John and his Wonky Bishop for the time being, pondering in the made-up pub, in his fictional parish about the very real matter of our relationship with money.