



**Sermon preached by Archbishop Justin Welby at the Commissioning of Church Credit Champions, St George-in-the-East, London, 29 September 2015. Â Â**

*Revelation 5 Â Â*

It really is moving to see the ways the church has responded to the issues of the mastery of finance over so many human lives and its tyranny over so many human lives. It's an extraordinary moment that the church rose to the challenge over the last many years, about six or seven years since the depths of the financial crisis in 2008/09 and has responded.

And here we are for the commissioning of the Credit Champions. It's humbling to see that because it is a movement of God's Spirit among us.

Those of you who are shortly going to be commissioned as Church Credit Champions have heard God's call, as the whole church has in recent years, to be a church of the poor for the poor; to seek justice and the common good for all in our society.

You have set up credit union access points in your churches, brought new people onto the boards of local credit unions, supported people struggling with debt through signposting them to debt advice resources.

You have seen the need, and you have met it with love, grace and hope.

We all know that the Christian relationship with money is, at best, slightly ambivalent. We recognise when it's got the wrong place, but we find it quite hard to find the right place.

Let's go back in our thinking a few years, 2006/07, and it was clear that the forces of finance, not just the economy, but the forces of finance had become the dominant power in our society. That the way the economy was working depended on individuals borrowing more and more to spend more and more, and keep the whole thing churning.

But it was obvious to some people that that is not a situation that can continue indefinitely. It's a sort of pyramid selling act on a global scale. Countries and individuals borrowing more and more in order to keep the volume of consumerism turning.

And so when money, as it always does, and finance, as it always does, having promised that it will look after us ever so well, turns out to be a cruel slave master, and particularly for the poorest in society, a slave master of the upmost cruelty that binds people in chains, that takes away their hopes, takes away their homes, takes often away their families, damages them at the most profound levels, it was a shock that we have not seen for many, many years, right back to the 1930s. We hadn't had that same credit shock.

Credit shocks, shocks to the financial system as opposed to simply a slight downturn in the economy, lead to generational change, and that is what we've been going through. And I think for many of us that there's always the sense of, how are we going to cope with this?

There was this sense that we were just getting our head above water and suddenly someone has raised the water line. It is the people on the edge who always suffer the most, the ones who simply can't afford that extra few pounds a month, or the ones who find that they end up with payday lenders where it's not an extra few pounds a month but a cumulative growth of [pounds] that brings them to near despair.

We know that that's wrong. But finding what is right is a different question.

When it comes to credit and debt, saving and borrowing, we become even more anxious.

In Shakespeare's Hamlet, there's a character called Polonius. At one point he says rather pompously:

“Neither a borrower nor a lender be,  
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,  
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.”

In other words, you're going to get into trouble either lending or borrowing. And that's a fairly classic way to stay out of the system.

Scripture is full of advice about money. Exodus 22:25: "If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest.”

Deuteronomy 23:19-20: "You shall not charge interest to your countrymen: interest on money, food, or anything that may be loaned at interest. You may charge interest to a foreigner, but to your countrymen you shall not charge interest, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land which you are about to enter to possess.”

In other words, the use of money to make money for most of history has been seen as a dangerous process. And so it goes on, there is an ambivalent attitude to money.

The reading we had from Revelation 5 has at its heart, in the theology of Revelation, the idea that the hardships of life as we experience and live them blinds us to the reality of God who is faithful, who liberates, and in the end will save. One of the things that are seen in Revelation, and the apocalyptic works in the Old Testament, as controlling people habitually is the power of money and the economy.

So how do we respond to that as Christians today? Where do we find the liberation that we are looking for, that enables money to be the good servant it should be and not the bad master that we have experienced, particularly in the last seven or eight years.

I want to raise three particular points. The first one is responsibility. We need to set parameters, and the Church Credit Champions are not there to take away the limits, they're not there to shift responsibility, to take on responsibility for what other people should do. They are about enabling people, helping people to find for themselves the limits of what they should and should not do. As Champions, there is a responsibility to help people think about their relationship with money.

Our individual relationship with money is intensely complicated and difficult. We ascribe value to people on the basis of their money. We often forget that people with no money are equally valuable to God – often more valuable to God – than those who have huge sums of money. And we forget that money is often something that promises to help us but ends up ruling us.

So as Champions I urge you first of all, picking up some of the themes behind that reading in Revelation, to point to true liberation, to what is the true value of the human being, which is the value they are set by God rather than the value they are set by the things that you are dealing with in dealing with credit.

In other words, the first step is through people finding responsibility to give them liberation, to give them freedom – freedom in their minds, hearts and souls about what they are worth in God's eyes and what they are worth in the world's eyes and how you see them. And they will understand what they are worth in God's eyes by what they seem to be worth in your eyes.

How you value them will transform their own understanding.

The second point is about what Pope Benedict called gratuity, or what we might call grace or generosity. Gratuity is a core principle of understanding how finance becomes part of the common good. It's saying I'm not going to make the most I can always, I'm not going to squeeze the biggest sum I can out of everything. It applies particularly in the credit union sector and the payday lenders are the opposite of gratuity – payday lenders are about how much can we get away with charging and the law will still work so that we make money.

Credit unions are very often about how little can we charge and still be a sustainable operation. Sustainable in the sense of coping with loans that don't get repaid, sustainable in the sense of being able to keep things ticking over. Sensible.

Gratuity is grace in action. A combination of responsibility and gratuity says to money, – recognise your importance. I have a responsible attitude towards you. And I'm going to demonstrate my mastery of you by not squeezing every cent that I can get.

It's a crucial change in our attitude. You've probably seen in the press in the last few weeks about the drugs company in States that increased the cost of a particular drug fifteen hundred times, was it? Because they're the only people supplying it so they can more or less charge what they want. And even then they were surprised that most people thought this was not an entirely beneficial idea.

Gratuity says there will always a bit left over that I will not seek to squeeze.

And a final thing that I want to pick out for the Credit Champions. The responsibility, the gratuity, the mastery of money, is about the focus of our vision. By this I mean that we're assured in how and why money is being loaned, but at the level of which this network of Credit Champions is going to operate.

It's been very promising in the pilot project that it has focused very heavily on the local, which is where it should be. It's about changing people in the most local area. And where we do that, when money is turned into a servant - this is the change for which we have to pray - and actually serves people, it releases what God has given us in creativity. And that's the final thing.

I've told this story before and you may have heard it, but it just had such a huge impact on my thinking so I'm going to tell it again.

When I was Bishop of Durham, during that very brief period I met a very remarkable man from the local estate in Bishop Auckland. I suppose he would have been in his early thirties, and this was 2012. He'd lost his job in 2009. He was a painter and decorator. He found his way eventually, he wanted to start his own business, but he couldn't get the capital he needed.

So eventually he found his way to a local social enterprise which funded him. It enabled him to get the kit he needed to set up by himself. He repaid the funding in less than three months - it might even have been less than a month.

By the time I met him he'd been working on his own for about six months and he had an order book going back eight months - he was a very good painter and decorator - and he was looking at how he could expand a little and grow. Perfectly routine of someone starting their own business out of hardship and doing very well.

Let me just tell you how much money he needed - and it took him eighteen months to find it. Two hundred pounds.

Two hundred pounds. That was what he needed. And that two hundred pounds from a small social enterprise that was willing even to look at someone who needed that little, that treated them as a person of infinite worth, regardless of the fact that what they wanted was, by their standards, very small but equally costly to administer as something much bigger - that enabled his creativity and his skills.

I said to him, "How are you finding it now?"

He said, "It's amazing. I hated being unemployed because I was brought up to work. I've got a partner and two children, and not providing for them as I've been brought up to do humiliated me."

You can understand that.

And so the money being found and made to serve his responsible attitude towards it – he was an extraordinary person, I was really moved by it – and the fact that it was done at the very small, very local level, gave liberation to his creativity.

Where people are struggling financially, where they don't have access to finance and financial products, there is often a sense that they're not able to flourish in the way that could otherwise. It's not saying that money is everything. It's that money has to be the protagonist in some stories for those stories to work.

The analysis suggests that the network has already generated over £800,000 of value in society, through the interest saved by people borrowing from credit unions rather than high-cost credit providers, and by encouraging more local volunteering. Over the whole pilot period, the network is projected to generate about £2 million in community benefit.

This is stuff that is going to make a huge difference.

Where does it start? It starts with this in Revelation 5: when nothing is happening, when nobody can open the scroll, what do they find when they open the scrolls? A lamb. The person of Jesus Christ. A helpless figure on the cross. The body that disappeared from the tomb, whose whole life spoke of the infinite value of those he loved.

And when you channel that love of Christ into the lives of individuals in practical action around the mastery of money, and bringing it into servitude, there will be the most dramatic changes.

It is really a privilege to be with you today, to be celebrating what we've already achieved and to have the honour and blessing of being able to commission you to continue this work. Thank you for what you're doing. Amen.

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