

Dethroning Mammon:

Making Money Serve Grace

By Justin Welby

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The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book is an annual tradition that has been going now for decades. Each year, the Archbishop of Canterbury commissions a book on a theological or devotional Christian theme relevant to Lent, and congregations use the book as the focus for their Lenten preparation. Up and down the country, house groups, book groups and study groups will discuss the book chapter by chapter. Sermons will be preached on its theme, and the clergy will use the book as the basis for retreats and devotions.

This year, instead of choosing someone else's, the Archbishop of Canterbury has written his own Lent Book. His predecessor Rowan Williams wrote two Lent Books, but not while he was Archbishop. So why is this Archbishop writing his own? Because it is on his Mastermind Specialist Subject, money and materialism. The theme and the title is Dethroning Mammon. It is quite a powerful statement of intent that this Archbishop is asking his Church to focus on this particular subject this year. If you read the book carefully, towards the end he tells you why:

There may be some rhetorical value in an archbishop calling on society to repent of its view of Mammon. But I am not convinced that – beyond a few passing news headlines – it will have a great deal of lasting impact. However, the lessons of history demonstrate the capacity of a group within society to change attitudes, and I dream that we – as the Church – might rise to the call to be that group' (p.152).

The book uses a rich texture of scripture and examples from the Archbishop's own life experience to ask us who directs our actions and attitudes: God or Mammon? His suspicion informs his choice of title, and he ruefully notes that 'we may think it is unpleasant to have Mammon on the throne, but, at the same time, we have a

nasty suspicion that this false god is pretty firmly stuck to the seat, and that the alternatives are too dreadful to contemplate' (p.132). His book asks us to consider using this Lent to start putting that right.

Chapter 1 discusses our 'inbuilt tendency' to value what we see. Because Mammon is so visible, alluring and distracting, we forget to look at the world through God's eyes, so we are in thrall to a force that entices us into valuing the wrong things, and 'Mammon gains strength through our obedience' (p.1). Chapter 2 discusses the consequence of this, that we measure and therefore manage the wrong things, because they are so easy to count, which multiplies the error of our misdirected gaze. Chapter 3 reflects on the tragedy that is our acquisitiveness, whereby we accumulate possessions or wealth, regarding them as due rewards justly earned, then we clutch them to us as though they were truly ours and not God's. Chapter 4 looks at power and money, and the way in which these forces encourage us to feel lofty and important. But for Christians, worldly power and status exist only for the sake of service: 'this is a superpower that all Christians have – to take something that no one else wants to do, and through Christ, turn it into a beautiful thing' (p.98). Chapter 5 contains a beautiful meditation on the example of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who, when everyone else has abandoned

Jesus as an 'embarrassing celebrity failure', act with extraordinary generosity to give him a decent burial, out of sheer love and for no good reason. For the Archbishop, these two men embody God's economy. The final chapter, Chapter 6, is our call to arms: 'never mind chocolate, or even alcohol: try giving up materialism for Lent' (p.7).

But how? First, by listening carefully, so that we can truly hear God. Lent offers us the ideal opportunity for this. Then we must act on what we hear, and repent for letting Mammon win us over. Finally, we must deliberately enthrone Christ as our Lord. This sounds a tall order, but there is some comfort.

