

Sunday 21 September 2025 – Martha’s Law – Michael Bayley

This is the Season of Creation in the Church Calendar. On the previous day, Ann Pettifor led a Study Day at St Mark’s, entitled ‘Just’ Economics?, offering a critical analysis of prevailing governmental strategies before outlining an alternative ethically-driven, environmentally-responsible approach in which economics serves the common good. Michael Bayley pursues the issue of how to think and act creatively about the issues she raised.

Readings:

Amos 8: 4-7. Luke 16: 1-13.

Sermon: Martha’s Law – Michael Bayley

The Old Testament reading from Amos is one of the most eloquent denunciations of a society in which the poor and disadvantaged are ignored and exploited.

“Here this, you who trample upon the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying when will ... the Sabbath (be over) that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great, and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the refuse of the wheat?” [Amos 8: 4-6]

The gospel reading is also about money. The parable about the deceitful steward is somewhat puzzling. However what is clear is that the steward when faced by the serious problem over losing his job acted decisively to try and make provision for his future better by telling some of his masters creditors to fiddle their bills. I suggest that it is about somebody who, when faced by a crisis, acted decisively even though what he actually did was obviously not admirable.

While our times are very different from the time that Amos was living nevertheless it portrays our own time more accurately than is comfortable. While it is important to act decisively it is also important to act sensitively in a way which addresses the reality of the situation and not just what we think ought to be the case. To say that there is disagreement about how we should respond to our present social and economic woes is to put it mildly. Yesterday I felt Ann Pettifor did help us to think about the situation more creatively but we as a society find it so difficult to agree on the right way to confront the problems we face creatively. Different parts of our society are not good at listening to one another.

We can take some inspiration from what followed the tragic death of 13 year old Martha Mills in August 2021. I am sure that many of us will know the story. Martha fell off her bike injuring her liver and she was admitted to Kings College Hospital in London. She remained on the ward as her condition deteriorated and she died of septic shock on the 31st of August 2021, a few days before her 14th birthday. There had been an *appalling* series of mistakes. In September 2022, Martha's mother wrote a powerful article about Martha and her treatment Kings College Hospital in the Guardian. The article was widely read and has been studied in medical schools: 'tens of thousands of NHS employees read it and thought about it such was the power of her description.' A subsequent inquiry concluded, “that the tragic death of Martha is a clear example of systemic injustice, where the views and voices of patients were not heard and acted on. The information and insights from Martha's parents were not believed, were undervalued or were not understood - but this is not an isolated case.”

Following the significant public response to the *Guardian's* article Martha's parents were asked by the think tank that has been set up, to work jointly on a patient safety initiative designed to learn from Martha's death. After research and a meeting with NHS representatives and other

health stakeholders the decision was taken to concentrate on Martha's Rule. The essence of Martha's rule is simple. The then Secretary of State for health said, "the introduction of Martha's rule from April will put families at the heart of the patient's own care recognising the critical role that they have in the treatment of loved ones.'

Martha's mother Meropa Mills has argued that Martha's Rule will not only save lives but bring about a significant shift in the culture within hospitals towards patient power.^[29] Mills said of her experience at Martha's bedside: 'I was "managed", I hadn't been listened to and I felt powerless ... If a patient and family escalation system such as Martha's rule had existed – and had been clearly advertised around the hospital with posters and stickers – I'm sure I would have used it and it could well have saved Martha's life.'¹³

Martha's room has now been rolled out in all English hospitals and is widely credited with having saved the number of lives, for example in a two-month period 14 patients were transferred to intensive care after Martha's Rule was invoked – potentially life-saving escalations to an intensive care unit that might otherwise not have occurred.

Martha's mother talked about a significant shift in the culture within hospitals towards patient power. In an interview on Radio 4 about a week ago she gave a very interesting example of this. She said that there was a consultant who had been hugely supportive in her campaign. Once Martha's rules were being implemented that same consultant was named as having failed. The consultant told Martha's mother how initially he had been furious: there must be a mistake; this is wrong; I couldn't have done that and then he stopped and thought and realised that he had done it and then he thought: 'Thank God for Martha's Law'. It is not just a protection for patients: it is also their protection for staff and, for the staff, it is a vital lesson, not just in learning to listen really listen, but also a lesson in humility.

Martha's law marks a significant shift in the culture within hospitals towards patient power. I would argue that we need a similar shift in the way our society responds to the deep divisions within it especially towards those who are poor, excluded and vulnerable. Of course it is quite easy for us to point at politicians and economists and say that they both need to listen to people much more carefully and also to learn the virtue of humility. I think that is true but it is not just a lesson for them. Surely churches must be places where we listen to one another, especially those who are vulnerable and churches certainly need to be places where we learn the virtue of humility. In a society which seems to be becoming ever more polarised and divided surely there is a most important role for churches to be places where we really can talk to one another, listen to one another and be open to change our minds and once it is clear that there is something that needs to be done to be decisive about it.

But perhaps It is a mistake for me to try and apply any lessons we may learn from Martha's Law. Perhaps I should do what Jesus did, just tell the story. I find the story of Martha's law an inspiration of extraordinary good coming out of an appalling tragedy. I end with a prayer:

O Lord Jesus Christ
who condemned sin
But loved sinners, help us to approach all the evils
Of our common life without hypocrisy,
Without pride, but with honesty and love;
And as you came to release us all from sin,
Enable us to be the means of bringing that liberation to others,
With care and humility
For your sake. Amen

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