

All Saints Alive

What's it worth? *Reader Geoffrey Oates considers*

Oscar Wilde, the 19th Century Anglo-Irish playwright and wit-about-town, gave this definition of cynicism: '*Knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing*'. The troubles in the financial markets this summer have probably left most of you indifferent, puzzled, or slightly uneasy. Wall Street and the City of London are a bit of a mystery to most people, and attempts of 'lay' journalists to explain US sub-prime mortgages and the financial instruments that fund them have generally been wildly inadequate.

But if there is one concern that Britain readily grasps, it is house prices, and the subject divides us bitterly. As prices soar in most parts of the country, especially the South East, those who bought houses a long time ago have seen their personal wealth grow and grow. For young people looking to set up their own home for the first time, it is a time of frustration and anxiety.....will they ever be able to buy a home of their own, and if they do will they pay too much, and burden themselves with mortgages they cannot really afford? And what if its value then goes down....? - the dreaded curse of negative equity, when you find your home is worth less than the amount of your mortgage.

So we should not be surprised to find people, or even to find ourselves asking 'how much is my house really worth?' I am NOT going to give you a dour lecture about the worthlessness of worldly possessions and the dangers of the deadly sins of greed and materialism. I am going to give you a straight answer. If you think only of its price, then a house, like anything else in the world, is worth whatever you can get someone else to pay you for it. But if you think of the place where you were brought up, the place you raised your own children, the place that has given you comfort and security, and offered hospitality to friends and relatives down the years, then its value cannot be measured.

I have seen the price of our house rise rapidly since I came to Hertford 8 years ago, but what does that matter? Eight years ago we had one home, today we have one home.

In the Roman world where Jesus lived and the Apostles preached the Gospel, people had no qualms about sticking a price on a human life. Slavery was the backbone of the economy, and men, women and children were bought and sold routinely in the market places. What were their lives worth? Whatever the buyer was willing to pay. To St Paul and other early Christian teachers, this gave an ideal metaphor for what Christ meant to the world, and they turned the wisdom of the cynics on its head. Jesus buys you out of slavery – not legal slavery to your master, but spiritual slavery to sin and death. And he pays with his own blood, his own life. Here, it really is the price that matters!

The original idea of release from slavery may not speak so directly to us any more, but a wonderful and liberating truth still calls out to us across the centuries. Put wealth and possessions, salary and social status, even family and friends out of your mind and ask 'What am I worth?' and the simple answer is, 'You are worth the life of the Son of God', because that is the price he paid for you on the cross on Calvary.

No picking and choosing, no haggling for discounts, just one flat price for all. So let none boast that he or she is dearer in God's sight. There was no-one for whom Christ died just a little, no-one for whom Jesus has to do any more than give his life. In God's sight we are all equal in value, and we must learn to see and value our fellows and neighbours in the same way.

One price, paid in full, once and for all, and paid on the nail.