

God and Possessions

A sermon on Matthew 6: 24-34 by the Revd Dr Canon Jennifer Smith, 9 August 2020

Holy God, break your word as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips, and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength, and our Redeemer.

AMEN

Friends, there are those who might think this week with the theme ‘God and possessions’ would be the shortest sermon in your whole series – isn’t it just ‘possessions bad,’ and ‘righteous sharing good?’ Those of us of a certain generation can sing a chorus of ‘Can’t buy me love’ and we can all go home and get out the bin bags and have a good clear out of things to give to ‘the poor’?

Or we can take it a step further, and follow the lead of British artist Michael Landy: quoting that inestimable theological source Wikipedia,

“...*Break Down*, the performance work which put him in the public eye, was held in February 2001 at an old branch of the clothes store C&A on Oxford Street in London (C&A had recently ceased trading, and the shop had been emptied). [This is personal to me, as my husband Keith worked at that branch of C and A for a year after school, and I have spent some money there in the 90s when I was better dressed than I am now.]

Landy gathered together all his possessions, ranging from postage stamps to his car, and including all his clothes and works of art by himself and others, painstakingly catalogued all 7,227 of them in detail, and then destroyed all in public. The process of destruction was done on something resembling an assembly line in a mass production factory, with ten workers reducing each item to its basic materials and then shredding them.

Break Down, which was a joint commission from *The Times* newspaper and Artangel, attracted around 45,000 visitors. At the end of the process all that was left was bags of rubbish, none of which was sold or exhibited in any form, except for the edition of inventory books, listing all destroyed items, available to buy when exiting through the gift shop. Landy made no money as a direct result of *Break Down*, and following it had no possessions at all.

Is this what God wants? No, I don’t think so. Jesus says ‘seek first the new culture – that is the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and then all these things (clothing, food, iPhones) will come to you as well.’ Maybe not iPhones.

I want to ask then, what are we meant to do with our possessions? How acquire things, dispose of them, use them? What is a Christian ethic of ownership?

I think we have on offer two different sets of ethics of possession – one I’m going to call an ethic of affluence: getting and keeping, owning, economic autonomy, hoarding. This I want to call by an older word – mammon. The ethic of affluence.

And while it’s a sermon for another day, but I think we saw the best example going of the ethics of affluence in the example of Joseph in Genesis 47 you heard read today. Hoarding,

using possessions as a lever to build political power and keep it. Even up to the ownership of people's very bodies. Our first 'possession,' in the ethics of affluence is our bodies, of course.

The other ethic which I hope will come off a bit better, I want to call an ethic of abundance. Jesus himself talks a lot about abundance – fear free, low anxiety, sharing – and Paul too, not today, but elsewhere – when he says

“The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ...And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”

Every blessing in abundance: a mighty promise this.

SO the point of my sermon today is we have on offer these two parallel pathways with our possessions – including not just the 7,227 things you might have, but our very bodies and lives. Affluence and Abundance.

Of course I can say reject affluence – a false idol. Seek abundance. But this involves for me an ongoing work of real repentance. Because I at least do serve these two masters – I play on both these teams despite Jesus' words. And I spend time trying to play just enough on the one to pacify my conscience, and so I look like a righteous person on the outside – I can pass as someone who follows an ethic of abundance in relation to my possessions – but I'm a closeted servant of affluence, still.

So before we get too righteous – a confession.

I love home and personal makeover shows. These are completely compelling for me, because they speak to a deep desire to come into the promised land of good things, the good land into which the author of Deuteronomy says God is bringing us, the land of olive trees and honey where we will want for nothing and grow rich by its fruit.

Do you have makeover shows in Australia too?

In this world that is meant to be so secular, the popularity of these shows tells me that there is something about new life, rebirth that never goes out of style. Conviction, repentance, forgiveness and then new life, tearful joy as the new kitchen is revealed – this is the story arc of every one of them. And this is no surprise the story arc of our growing freedom in Christ as well. Old fashioned this. Conviction – we see what is wrong. Repentance – we turn toward the good. Forgiveness and new life – we are free.

Whether it's a new garden or perfect paint and carpets, well-behaved children or the confidence to go on a date with someone you've fancied. These programmes speak to our continued longing for well being, happiness, wholeness. Abundance.

They speak to the longing for these things, even if they can't answer it. Not that they don't try, and not that the happiness isn't real!

I am sure that all things being equal God has nothing against new carpets and clutter free kitchens. If only it were so easy, if only all it took were granite worktops, magnolia paint and the right handbag to make our lives glow!

We, gathered here today, share these longings for an abundance of comforts and refreshments. I hope we do. I've already told you I think I serve two masters still. With my possessions and way of holding them, I get seduced down the road of the ethic of affluence. And it is a seductive road, how easily these two, affluence and abundance can get confused! Affluence is so seductive particularly because it so closely imitates abundance. Because none of us, myself included, who has ever had nothing would be as foolish to say possessions do not matter. Tell that to someone fleeing Yemen with one pack.

Having no possessions is a horrible, gut wrenching thing. It kills people. And none of us would be protected. We rightly fear having nothing. The question is, how shall we respond to that fear?

Because the passage from Matthew we heard read is about fear and anxiety. Jesus' command is about destroying these things, not our possessions per se. And not just for us, but for everyone. And Jesus saw, I think, that these things, fear, anxiety, can often attach to the getting, the holding and keeping of things. The ethics of affluence breed them, if we are not careful.

This does require a change in my life, if I were really going to reject affluence in favour of abundance – I haven't yet and this will prove it.

Can I ask, how many people here own a power drill for doing repairs? Because I own one. I think I might even have two. I read a study that said the average drill sold in the UK would be used, that is, be turned on, for a total of 13 minutes during its entire life. And everyone in a certain socio economic group has one. And mine I don't think has made it close to the 13 minute mark – though I am not bad at hanging shelves and things like that. What would it be as societies to repent of that kind of possession ownership?

Where affluence is about individual wealth, abundance is about communities where no one is hungry.

Where affluence separates people, encouraging them to divide and protect their homes and possessions, abundance draws us into community, and demands our care-taking of each other. This is what Paul meant when from our second reading he wrote '...God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.' Indeed John Wesley my predecessor said something similar – earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can.

Get all you can without hurting your soul, your body, or your neighbour. Save all you can, cutting off every needless expense. Give all you can. Be glad to give, and ready to distribute; laying up in store for yourselves a good foundation against the time to come, that you may attain eternal life.

Chasing after affluence leads to fearful hoarding: claiming abundance is about wealth poured out, tables groaning under food and homes noisy with celebration. An abundant ethic with possessions probably means I need to risk trusting my neighbour, and relying on her a bit more too.

This is why when we want to celebrate something in church, we feast together, rather than fasting alone!

Where affluence creates consumers, abundance creates neighbours.

Where affluence hides from need, walking by on the other side of the street, abundance anticipates it, runs to it with food and help and all good things: abundance loves as it gives – Abundance is about holy feeding, giving that satisfaction that neither dollars nor pounds nor even bread alone can give.

Abundance teaches us that we are never richer than when we spend ourselves to feed our neighbours: Abundance is overflowing, giggling, must-be-told good news. Abundance is debts forgiven, lives remade, new chances, twelve baskets of food left when there was scarce enough to begin with.

Abundance makes visible the invisible hands that stock our shelves, abundance fights the isolation of older people in suburban cul-de-sacs, abundance teaches us to know our neighbours even when they are different from us and begs them to join us at the table of thanksgiving.

This is the ethic of possessions which Jesus commends to us – and again, not as a brick bat to beat us with – but as a description, a promise of how God deals with us.

I mentioned Paul's words: the point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

We follow a God who is a bountiful sower. There is nothing sparing in the love that God has for each of us, nothing sparing in God's longing for new life to spring forth in the furrow of each of our lives.

So consider this and deal gently with yourself about your possessions. Where we have need, let us try to share it. Where we have used possessions to protect ourselves from others, or worse to lord it over them, let us try to give that up. Always we remember that shrouds have no pockets. And eternal life begins today.

SO with our possessions, we are not just to get out the bin bags and throw everything away – we are to consider how things connect us to one another. Who made them, who uses them, how we dispose of them.

We need not run to instant makeovers to make us holy. And neither do we need despair because we still have a guilty power drill in the cupboard – rather repent. Let God turn us little by little, degree by degree, into God's new culture.

AMEN.