

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

PROPER 13

SUNDAY 4 AUGUST 2013

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Psalm 49, Luke 12: 13-21

“Money is not the Issue”

It would be very easy to preach a fire and brimstone sermon on money this morning, and greed, and how, when the end of our lives comes none of us is any better off than another. We all die, and none of us can take our riches with us. Even without the warning words of Psalm 49 or the story of the Rich fool in Luke we all know this.

But we all know that accumulating wealth is no guarantee for a happy and healthy life, that piling up treasure in barns will, in the end, not guarantee that you will be able to enjoy the benefits it brings, and relax, eat, drink and be merry for many years after you've done the accumulating.

We all know that, so I don't need to tell you that. And we all do it. We wouldn't be living in North Balwyn if we hadn't in one way or another worked hard, saved up, and made sure we had a decent super or pension to look after us in later life. Why? Because we all crave security, safety, and control. And money can buy us all these things, and more.

Although there are some romantic notions around about “giving everything to the poor” and “trusting God will provide”, we all know that real life is usually a lot easier with at least some money in the bank.

I've got a couple of friends who have not been able, for reasons beyond their control, to build up even minimal material security for themselves. Who are living from one day to the next, struggling to make ends meet, with no money in the bank, no super, and no buffer to tide them over in time of trouble. One of them is seriously ill and seems to be forever waiting for cheap treatment and drug trials, another just refuses to see a GP because it will always cost some money she doesn't have. It's hard to keep in touch with them because they can't afford a landline and their mobiles are forever out of credit and the library computer they use for email is down half the time. What they all have in common, apart from struggling to make ends meet, is that they are furiously independent and won't even accept a cup of coffee in a cafe if I offer them one. As one of them said: “It's the only thing I've got, my independence. Please, don't try take that away as well”.

Even though we all know we can't take it with us, wealth, prosperity will make life a lot easier before we take our last breath and is able to secure our basic needs, even when we are no longer able to work or accumulate more wealth. Even where we all know that it is a relative security without any guarantees.

Being able to buy a nice place to live, to afford good medical care, to have access to a computer and a phone for private use, to have our own car and be able to pay for the petrol, to even be able to go to the shop and get our food instead of scavenging through the left overs that are thrown out at the back of the supermarket at the end of the day, makes life a lot easier and more enjoyable.

So is the Psalm saying, is Jesus saying, we should sell up our Balwyn properties, empty our super funds and move out to somewhere cheaper and less comfortable, and give all our treasure away to become rich towards God?

Or to stay with the debt crisis in our Uniting Church, should we, if we really wanted to follow in Jesus' footsteps, sell up our Church properties and move out to another congregation, saving the wider Church

and other Church communities around us a lot of angst and trouble by making an amount of money available that might be enough to cover a considerable part of the debt incurred by the Uniting Church?

Some are saying this whole debt crisis, is an opportunity for the Church to return to her real calling. That the Church has no business owning property and running multimillion dollar businesses and that this debt crisis is a blessing in disguise. That God is bringing us back to our core beliefs and priorities, inviting us to re-imagine our Church and its properties in a radical way.

Sell it all! Start again! Meet in small house groups like the first Christians did, without all the ballast an institution brings. Without the offices, the agencies, the schools, the nursing homes, the education facilities, the staff. Hire a cinema like some very successful evangelical Churches in Melbourne are doing. Simply live the gospel from home and cut all the frills. Do we need all this "stuff" as a Church? Wouldn't life be a lot easier if our Church was not a multimillion dollar enterprise, but a simple community of faithful people living out the gospel? And aren't this week's readings a stark reminder of this?

Yes, I think this whole debt crisis is an opportunity and invitation for us to stop and think what is core and what is not. But I don't think the psalm or the story we read this morning tell us to just sell up and go bush.

It's not that simple.

Life is not that simple. And Jesus' message is never that simple.

When the Churches in China were forced underground for many years, small house church like groups continued to exist without being able to connect to each other, without facilities for Christian Education, without communication with the outside world. And while Christian communities in other parts of Asia post-colonialism continued to grow and develop in dialogue with both Christian and non-Christian groups around them, in China growth became stunted. Some of the groups survived, but only barely, and many came out the other end with the most bizarre theologies and practices imaginable, and had become so introverted they found it difficult to reconnect with the wider body of Christ.

This is what happens when members of the body of Christ, be it individuals or small groups, do not have opportunity to talk, check and discern with the larger body of Christ about their faith.

Desperate evangelical groups which don't belong to a larger framework show the same characteristics. Right now we see ethnic congregations seeking to join the Uniting Church exactly because they recognise this.

Not only can it be financially advantageous to share administration and education with other Churches, small groups tend to lose out on the broadness and depth of the gospel and become self-centered and introvert. The body of Christ turns in and shuts down when there is no communication, no community, no back and forth, no discussion, no mutual encouragement or challenging. And it needs a larger framework to facilitate that happening. It needs educators and education, it needs prophets who make it their job to challenge them into action, it needs people who will be on the lookout for ways to be Church in the world, it needs connection points and relationships with others and other groups, no matter how annoying and difficult this can be at times. Like limbs cut off from the flow of fresh blood, even for a short time, small, independent Church groups have a tendency to isolate themselves and turn gangrenous. And that is not the community the gospel pictures when it talks about the Kingdom of God.

And that's why we need a wider Church, other congregations, a variety of faith communities. That's why we need larger gatherings, on Sunday morning, at the CTM, in presbytery, at synod, in ecumenical and interfaith settings. We need community, not only for encouragement and nurture, but also to keep us on our toes, to keep us alive and functioning, to prevent us from turning in and becoming egocentric and self absorbed.

But let's return to the Psalm and the gospel we read this morning. Do or don't they encourage us to sell up and let go?

First of all you need to realise a few things:

In Jesus' day dividing an inheritance was highly exceptional. It was possible, but keeping possessions together was the norm. Rabbi's, like Jesus, had the jurisdiction to enforce a division, but it would have been something they would very rarely have to do.

Jesus lived in a communal society. Individuality and personal independence were alien concepts and asking for a part of an inheritance for oneself would have been conceived by anyone not only as a threat to community, but also as stupid and short-sighted. No one, at that time, could have lived the self sufficient, independent and isolated lives we are used to in our day and age. In an agrarian society highly dependent on weather, the land, and the labour and support of family and neighbour, going it alone was simply not an option.

The ideal scripture offers for people to live, the way of the Kingdom Jesus preaches, is connected to that reality. It is the ideal of family living in harmony from Psalm 133, a vision of mutuality and sharing.

In the story of the rich fool, in the space of three verses the word "I" is used six times. That "I" indicates that ego is central in this story. With no room for "you" or "us" anywhere in the story, this "I" is storing up riches for his own comfort and safety in the illusion he is in control and doesn't need another or even the Other with a capital.

You may recognise yourself in this man. The desire to live a life that can be independent and self-sufficient. Of being in control, of staving off any threat to our eating, drinking and making merry now, or at a later date.

That's what this story is about. About that craving, that insatiable and, in the end, pointless, greed for security, for independence, for self sufficiency. About the illusion that we are, that we ever can be in control of our own destiny, that we can make ourselves safe if only we focus and work hard enough.

A message both for our personal life, and for the Church.

What Jesus preaches, what the scriptures present as the ideal way for God's people to be living, is a life in community, of interdependence, of mutuality and sharing.

That's why Jesus refuses to divide the inheritance. Not because it is wrong to have an inheritance, but because it is wrong to want to have for oneself what can be shared with others.

As people of God we have been endowed with a rich inheritance, both spiritually and materially. We are all wealthy first world citizens that have very little to fear or complain about. And we are a Church richly endowed with property, opportunity, and connections to other Churches and the wider world. To take our part of that inheritance and keep it to ourselves would be sin. And not only sin, trying to hang on to it we may die without ever properly enjoying its fruits.

Refusing the inheritance and selling up, would be refusing the responsibility that comes with a rich inheritance. It might look like it could make life easier and simpler, but it would be a cop out.

The life Jesus invites us into, Kingdom living, is about accepting the inheritance and make it fruitful for the world. Money, buildings, property, multimillion dollar enterprises, then become a glorious and wonderful gift to enjoy and put to work in the service of the Kingdom, of the world wide community of God's children. Not something to feel guilty about, nor something to be so obsessed and fearful about it keeps us from living life as we receive it from God's hand. Amen.