

Guarding our hearts: from the love of money

Good morning St George's.

As the third child of a solo mum, for the first six years of my life, I grew up relatively poor. My Mum, whatever her reasons, did not want child support payments from my dad, and received little in government support due to the aggressive cutback of family welfare at the time. Now, I wouldn't describe this time as being in poverty comparatively speaking compared to the experiences of many in this country.

However, many of the memories and family stories of this time were marked by lack. Of course, due to my age, I didn't know any different. I thought it was normal that you negotiated with your siblings about what spread you would get next after the one you had ran out, rather than having all the spreads at one time. It didn't click that at *Hot Chick* in Ahuriri, Napier, you might buy fried chicken to share as a family, rather than just eating a roast potato each if you were eating out. And of course, it was only years later that it occurred to me that those super fun "let's have pancakes for dinner nights" were probably the result of there only being basic ingredients in the pantry rather than spontaneous parenting. Interesting how each of these stories involve food – I guess because it touches on that primal fear – will I have enough for tomorrow?

I don't remember a lot from this time, and My mum remarried when I was 6 and seemingly overnight, this sense of lack disappeared. However, I think that much of our maturing spiritually is about learning and dealing with the ways in which our early years have formed and shaped our habits, our thinking, and the attachments of our hearts. Some of the way that this time has formed me is trivial, like having a pet peeve during flatting situations when people would open a new bag of bread or bottle of milk before the previous one was finished. Like, "are you too good for the crusts?" Eat the crusts, or go feed the ducks or something, don't just leave them in the fridge. However, some of the ways this time formed me is much deeper and more significant.

It formed in me a mind-set of self-reliance. I never liked to ask my parents for anything, even later, when there was more means. I in turn projected this mind-set onto my relationship with God. I find it incredibly hard to ask God for stuff. Self-reliance of course is a form of control, antithetical to a child-like posture of receptivity and freedom. It also formed in me a poverty spirit, where having much, or abundance, even though it is something that a part of my heart craves, scares me. And when I see displays of opulence, of wealth wasted, a sense of anger arises within me.

When Josh explained this sermon series to me, the idea of guarding our hearts from evil that comes dressed in light, this is what came to mind: that I have justified and sanctified my lack as an inherently more just and righteous way of life. When I get angry at opulent displays of wealth, unnecessarily large houses or expensive cars, I have justified it as righteous anger at the injustice of it, when our neighbours in this city sleep in cars. Now, even though the injustice is real, does this explain the dark places my mind goes to when I think about the justice that ought to befall the wealthy?

Or when I read that Jesus says, "it is easier for a camel to get through the eye of the needle than for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of heaven," how easily I can think, that's not me, the gate of the Kingdom is wide open for me. Despite how globally and historically speaking, I am immensely wealthy. Of course, I don't compare myself to the majority world, but to those whom I judge in my heart because of their wealth.

And so when I read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, warning against the love of money, of being captivated and enslaved by wealth, I can easily say, that one's not for me, as I wrap up my lack in the guise of righteousness. But am I truly free? For both the haves and the have nots can be driven by what used to be called avarice, the desire to gain and withhold wealth and possessions. When I live from a mindset of lack, this affects my willingness to give. Rather than thinking, how can I meet other's needs, I

am fixed on my own. Perhaps I am not so free after all? Let's see what Jesus has to say on the matter.

Sermon on the Mount and Money

People also often talk about the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus amplifying the Law, "You have heard it said... but I say to you." I think it is better to say that Jesus is internalising the Law, rather than amplification. He is not making the Law harder by setting the bar higher, he is just bringing the Law to bear on our hearts. I read the sermon on the mount as Jesus' manifesto on freedom. Freedom on the inside, from the things that drive us. And so, when Jesus makes hyperbolic claims about cutting off the hand that cause us to sin which we don't know what to do with, we're meant to get the irony in these statements. A hand has never caused anyone to sin, cutting off your hand wouldn't get to the *heart* of the matter.

We often meet the external requirement of the Law, not because of any heart change, but because we lack the right circumstances or opportunity. St Cassian said, "Just as the words of the Gospel declare that even those who are not soiled in body have committed adultery in their heart, it is also possible for those who are not weighed down by money to be condemned along with the avaricious for their disposition and attitude. For it was the opportunity to possess that they lacked, not the desire, and it is the latter, rather than [poverty itself], that God is always wont to crown."

Concerning Treasures (6:19-21)

Jesus begins the treatment of money, by inviting us to examine where our treasure is, for where our treasure is, if it is not Jesus, there we will find our heart entangled. And whether we have a little or a lot, material possessions and wealth that we treasure will captivate our heart, that is, hold us captive. Rebecca DeYoung, in her book *Glittering Vices*, re-examining the capital vices, says that "overattachment to things

wears many faces - an overflowing shopping cart or a single cherished purchase, a stock folio (Kiwisaver) that is aggressive or conservative, a wallet full of credit cards or a safety deposit box with a few carefully guarded treasures, a garage full of expensive cars or a closet full of (bargains). Greed can captivate the young, the old and everyone in between. In all its varied expressions of gain and grasping, however, greed is a perverted love." Where is your treasure?

The Evil Eye (6:22-23)

Next in the Sermon we get this unusual intrusion in the discourse about money with a metaphor of the eye being the lamp of the body, and our eye can either be sound, or unhealthy, literally: evil. This metaphor of the eye, being a lamp for the body, again is reinforcing this theme throughout the sermon on the mount of the importance of the inner transformation that is needed. If the eye is healthy, the whole body will be full of light. The eye here, so the commentaries tell me, is synonymous with heart, again it speaks to our inner state. But the use of eye is poignant, because the 'evil eye' was a metaphor for envy. (Matthew 20:15 'AM I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious (lit. have an evil eye) because I am generous?') Where is your gaze? What do you envy? What does this reveal about where your treasure is? When I gaze at super expensive car, how much of my indignant response is really prophetic and righteous anger at injustice, and how much is simply envy? Not so much at the car, but the feeling of misplaced wealth.

Serving Two Masters (6:24)

Next, we get one verse, a very famous verse, about serving two masters: No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. The text assumes, that when wealth or possessions have become treasure, when they have taken our gaze, it is no longer a tool that we use, it is not something that serves us, but we it. We are the ones enslaved. Again, this enslavement, this captivity is a

matter of the heart, regardless of our means. This enslavement of the heart to money is opposed to the virtue of generosity, which Aquinas calls liberality, which comes from the same root of the English liberty or freedom. The free and open attitude of the generous contrasts with a preoccupation with possessions and tight-fisted grip on money as "mine." Aquinas names two hindrances to generosity that make it hard for us to detach, first is having sweated for it. The greedy person sees themselves as the master of their stuff, sufficient to satisfy their wants and needs. Earning and owning gives a sense of control. Even if it turns out that we are the ones being controlled. No one can serve two masters. Who or what are you serving?

The second is the experience of poverty. Rebecca DeYoung again writes: "The vulnerability and anxiety of living with scarcity can deeply shape the habits of our heart and deform our patterns of saving and spending. We say we believe in a bountiful God, but we do not live like we believe it. The fear of want dies hard." Which leads us to next part of Jesus' sermon.

Do not worry (6:25-34)

"Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." The largest section of the sermon on the mount is about not worrying. Not being anxious about tomorrow. Jesus is addressing the primary motivator for money and possessions having an inordinate place in our hearts – our fears and concerns for the future. How might wealth and possessions be an attempt to protect yourself against the threat of an uncertain future? Jesus' invitation to radical trust and gratitude is an antidote to our possessiveness. Trust for the future and gratitude for what we have received frees us to nurture within our hearts a posture of generosity.

Judging others (7:1-5)

The exhortation to not worry makes sense, but why is the exhortation not to judge others placed here? Is it perhaps because, in no other area of our lives is the temptation to hypocritical judging of other more prevalent than in how we respond to wealth and money? At least, this is true in my heart. Wherever we sit with how we relate to money and possessions, we will always be tempted to justify it by comparing and judging others rather than taking the log out of our own eye.

Now, one thing I noticed reading through this, is that nowhere does Jesus prescribe what each of us needs or limits us strictly to bare subsistent requirements. Jesus is inviting us to wonder: In my relationship to wealth and possessions, am I moving closer to open-handedness and lightness of heart, or closer to enslavement?

Generosity and the Corinthian Church

I just briefly want to touch on the collection for the Jerusalem Church we heard about in the NT reading. The Macedonians (namely - Thessalonica and Philippi) could overflow in generosity, despite their poverty, because they had given themselves (their hearts, their loves) to God. For them, to care for others was a privilege to be part of. The Corinthian Church, the year before had had the best of intentions, and began collecting, but something had changed. Perhaps their circumstances had changed and were now facing the same poverty that the Macedonian Church had known. Paul is not asking them to give beyond their means but is getting at their hearts. He is looking for eagerness. The amount is not important. Is the desire to be generous there? For the Corinthian Church, something has prompted them to be concerned for their own needs only, avarice has corroded the virtue of generosity and lead them to ignore the claims of justice. Sounding like she could be describing the Macedonian Church, Rebecca DeYoung writes: "Generosity's loose grip makes it second nature to give things away when the occasion arises. The morally mature, for whom virtue feels natural, take delight in giving, rather than regarding it as an

onerous duty or a dull chore." Do you find giving things away easy and enjoyable, like the Macedonian Church?

Conclusion

As I come in to close, I want to share one of my favourite verses from Eugene's Peterson's Message. It is his translation of Proverbs 11:24

The world of the generous gets larger and larger;
the world of the stingy gets smaller and smaller.

As I reflect on this morning's readings, I discover that despite the fact that I don't feel I have a lot, I am by no means free from the love of money. And despite the fact that I have sanctified my lack, dressing it up as righteousness, my heart is exposed as grasping and clinging, rather than in a posture of open-handed trust in God. So I want to take a vow before you all today. Not a vow of poverty, but a vow of generosity and trust. Perhaps you'll join me. For generosity is not about means, but about the state of our hearts.

Reflection

- Whether in abundance, little or just enough, how might wealth or possessions have captivated my heart?
- "If I keep handling possessions like I am for the next ten or twenty years, what sort of character will I develop and what kind of person will I become?" DeYoung
- How have I dressed up my love of money as good? (i.e., being a good steward, providing for my family, leaving an inheritance, self-righteous poverty spirit)
- Where/how do I need to trust God more to find freedom from anxiety about the future?