

Ecclesiastes 1.2,12-14,2.18-23; Ps.49.1-12; Colossians 3.1-11; Luke 12.13-21

At the funeral of Aristotle Onassis, one mourner leant over to another and whispered 'How much did he leave?' And the response came quickly 'Everything'.

We know the cliches – you can't take it with you, there are no pockets in shrouds, no banks in cemeteries. And yet, we focus so intently on what is politely called 'wealth management'. And to what end? The psalmist, not mincing words, goes straight to the point:

When we look at the wise, they die; fool and dolt perish together and leave their wealth to others.

The church has an unfortunate reputation with regard to money. Some imagine that the scriptures tell us that money is the root of all evil. Paul wrote to Timothy that it is love of money that is the root of all evil, not money itself.

And some people get restless and uncomfortable, claiming that the church is always asking for money. Well, yes. The body of Christ will not thrive on crumbs or nothing. I remember a Sunday school song we sang before decimal currency...

Hear the pennies dropping, listen as they fall, everyone for Jesus, he shall have them all.

A nice idea, but we are still stuck in the mindset of pennies. The church needs more than the price of a cup of coffee or two to sustain its liturgical and pastoral ministry. 2 Cor 9 has Paul telling us that 'The Lord loves a cheerful giver.' Cheerful means joyous but also ready, willing. It should be a joy, not an obligation or a burden, all according to our means.

My grandmother, I was often told, would put her last penny on the plate on a Sunday and the food in the pantry would last until the next wage packet on Thursday.

I have never lived in real poverty. True, as a young teacher, things were a bit tough and we used to wonder why there was so much month left at the end of the money, but there has always been a roof over the head, food on the table and something to cover ourselves. Sadly, this is far from the truth for too many.

So I am not reluctant to raise the complex theology of money, of wealth. Like everything else in creation, wealth and material possessions are there to be used. God's exhortations to the first earth people told them to till the earth and to care for it. That is, make full and good use of nature's bounty but do not over-exploit it to the point of unsustainability.

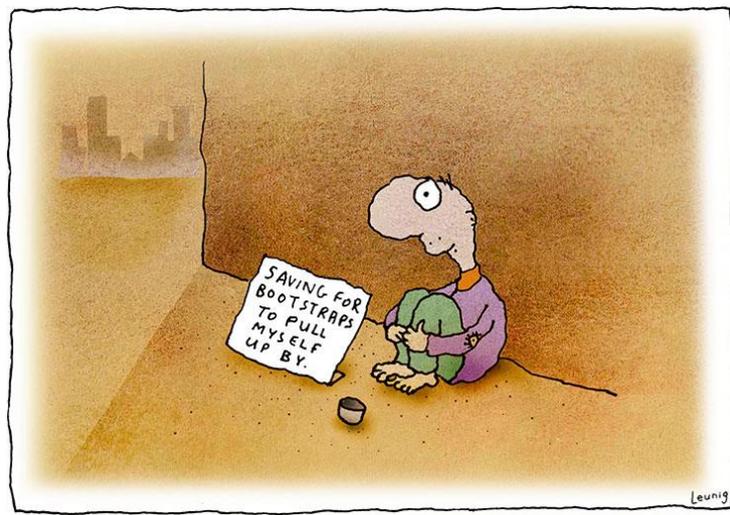
We are slowly learning that, I think, and the same principle applies to wealth. Our scriptures are packed with references (about 3000) to greed and usury but I don't hear many sermons preached on such themes. Other preoccupations seem to take over.

Our social and political discourse revolves enthusiastically around the economy. Now, I am no economist and we have a debate in Australia at present about reducing taxes, especially for the better off, who will reap the benefits of thousands. At the other end, the lowest earners will gain, well, a few pennies.

But we are talking about borrowing money to reduce taxes at a time when debt is booming after much necessary expenditure to keep people alive and the nation afloat.

So there is nothing wrong with people making a quid. The problem is amplified when we make decisions about what we do with it. Wealth is, at its best, a tool to benefit one's own self and those in a family group, but also to enhance the well-being of others, especially those who, for whatever reason, are unable to help themselves.

I love the cartoon in this week's e-news. An impoverished man sits begging with a placard which reads



If you look very closely, you will see that he still needs a pair of boots to hold the straps!

So we are drawn to the rich landowner who has done well, very well, and build bigger and bigger barns. He is, we might say, a very successful business owner. But God chides him "You fool!" says the voice from heaven.

So why is he foolish? Again, the problem is one of priority. It is not that he has amassed great wealth. He appears to have done nothing with it. And he might listen to himself, much use of the first person - I have done this, I will do that I will build bigger and better I, I, I. And, most interestingly, I shall say to my soul. I suspect his soul is so shrivelled, lifeless and self-absorbed, it would take no interest in what he has to say to it, if it hears at all.

Archbishop Anthony Bloom, former Russian Orthodox metropolitan of the UK, reminds us that only those who are detached from themselves are able to commit themselves to others.

And the Teacher, writing in Ecclesiastes, rolls his eyes and says

it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with.

What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun?

For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

People often ask if Ecclesiastes is positive and life-affirming or deeply pessimistic.

Well, I say both. Life, I read, is a two-sided coin. There is lots of rubbish, and there is abundant richness. Remember how Jesus said I am come that you might have life in all its abundance.

God does not wish us to live a life that is populated with hollow, empty preoccupations. That is vanity, emptiness. And we are very good at it.

Think where our society's energy is consumed. What does Kim Kardashian wear this month? How has the Duchess of Cambridge amended her wardrobe this week? How can I get the best phone plan? Will Chelsea win the FA cup with this manager? And so on. And on....

Later in Ecclesiastes we read *Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart.*

I like to reverse the relationship. God has placed the human heart in the bosom of eternity.

We live in a material world. But there is another, deeper reality. For me, the notion of God's eternity, doesn't begin when we die, what we call eternal life. I suggest that eternity is here and now and we are living within it. We don't get much of a look into eternity, but it is where we come from, where we go to.

Remember, before your bones were knit in your mother's womb, I knew you.

We have lived in that parallel life throughout our physical being and we shall return to it when we die. That way of being has a window on who, what and where we are in this physical existence. We are in it now and our work is to enrich it, to invest our wisdom, our energy, our assets into the future of life far from this place while putting whatever we can into the kingdom on earth, what Paul calls setting your mind on things that that are above.

We recently installed 27 solar panels on our roof. One of the questions we were asked to consider is how long it might take to recover our investment. I had to ask myself questions about my life expectancy. The person I live with, in her wisdom, suggested that this is the wrong way to look at it. It's not about our investment in the here and now. It is an investment far beyond our balance sheet. It is an engagement with eternity.

If we limit our vision to the imperatives of this material world, we fail God in what we can do for what lies far ahead.

We have an economy and we have a social organism. Which serves the other? Does society exist to serve the economy or can the economy serve the needs of society, or of eternity?

If we don't see the latter and work for it, like the rich man at the gate of eternity, we are fools in the eyes of God.