

“Our economic system is not God” a sermon partially relating to Genesis 25:19-34, preached at the evening service of Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on Sunday 16 July 2017.

You might think the title of this sermon is so obvious it does not need arguing.

However, one writer ...

“We follow an even more powerful religion, around which we have oriented our lives: economics. Think about it. [Economics](#) offers a comprehensive doctrine with a moral code promising adherents salvation in this world; an ideology so compelling that the faithful remake whole societies to conform to its demands.

However, if you think describing economics as a religion debunks it, you’re wrong. We need economics. It can be – it has been – a force for tremendous good. But only if we keep its purpose in mind, and always remember what it can and can’t do.”

Another writer:

“In his explanation of the first article of the creed, Martin Luther wrote that a god is that from which we expect all good things and to which we take refuge in times of trouble... Harvey Cox suggests the market economy has become our god in Luther’s sense. Cox takes his inspiration from Pope Francis, who spoke of the return of Golden Calf idolatry to our world today, in the form of the worship of money and the deification of the market.”

After establishing that evil is the basic issue, Cox turns to Augustine’s understanding of evil as the disordering of good. He draws upon the classic theological teaching of salvation as restoration to the condition of God’s original creation. Cox interprets creation as a process of decentralization in which God releases what he has created to become free and self-determining.

The market has a rightful role as one means among others for sustaining and enriching human life. But this role is disordered, because the market has become the goal and purpose of life. Here is where evil enters and why decentralizing can save the market’s soul.

The seven days of creation are stages in this decentralizing process. On the first day, for example, God separated light from darkness and both of these from himself. Each subsequent day of creation moves toward greater decentralizing. On the third day, trees and plants appear, generated not by God’s direct action, but by the energies of the first two days’ creation. This creation from below amounts to a trend that resembles market developments like co-ops and worker-owned firms.

By the seventh day, decentralizing currents, aided by technological advances like online banking and smartphone apps, are changing the nature of banks and other elements of the market.

Our passage tonight is also relevant.

One interpretation of Esau and Jacob is that the transaction, the selling of birthright, suggests an economy of scarcity as Jacob schemes for the birthright Esau has.

Such examples of scarcity are the product of brokenness and human culture and do not come from God's original economy. The broken economy suggests a scarcity of goods and a winner-take-all approach.

The Esaus of this world understand little of their birthright, and risk treating their political traditions and their political power with contempt, giving up their voice for a bowl of food, or selling their votes too cheaply for empty promises and slick rhetoric which promises easy gains in the short term. As Esau says, "let's eat, for tomorrow we die".

Such people do not have much appreciation for the long term, but maintain an immediate focus on pleasure and today's bread and butter issues. They are, therefore, easily manoeuvred out of their birthright and political power.

Jacob, by contrast, is the ancient farmer, who cultivates both the land and himself. His food comes from gardening, being the more "advanced" pastoral culture, which is in conflict with hunting. Jacob dwelt in tents, indicating that he stuck close to home, becoming educated, and familiar with the ways of the world. But instead of using his skill and knowledge to serve his brother, he uses cunning and rhetoric to deceive and trick Esau out of his rightful leadership role.

He is quick to spot the vulnerable and make a deal with them to his advantage. Jacob, unlike Esau, thought long term and planned ahead, anticipating the day that their father would pass on his blessing and then die.

Addressing this culture of scarcity, one writer says this:

"Capitalism has outlived its usefulness and is quickly destroying the planet and driving billions into poverty. [Wealth inequality](#) is long past unsustainable levels, and neoliberal capitalism is failing to provide economic security. Long ago, a radical socio-political-revolutionary Jew had a dream of a new kind of world, a world without classes ... a world without injustice. This world would be brought about by a calamitous overthrow of the current world order; the lowly would be raised and the haughty struck down."

Remember he says, remember Jesus's almost-countless invocations against wealth, against the rich, and in favour of the poor and destitute. What are the Beatitudes if not the promise of hope to the poor and exploited? What are the parable of Lazarus, and the warning that "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

All true followers of Jesus Christ must recognize that a system that lets millions die until it is profitable to save them is incompatible with the Kingdom of God and must be abolished.

We must take up our cross and follow Jesus down the path of revolution, of championing the oppressed against the powers of Caesar and Herod.

THE ACCRA CONFESSION

3. Gathered in Accra, Ghana, for the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, we visited the slave dungeons of Elmina and Cape Coast where millions of Africans were commodified, sold and subjected to the horrors of repression and death. The cries of "never again" are put to the lie by the ongoing realities of human trafficking and the oppression of the global economic system.

6. The root causes of massive threats to life are above all the product of an unjust economic system defended and protected by political and military might.

8. The policy of unlimited growth among industrialized countries and the drive for profit of transnational corporations have plundered the earth and severely damaged the environment.

9. This crisis is directly related to the development of neoliberal economic globalization, which is based on the following beliefs:

- unrestrained competition, consumerism and the unlimited economic growth and accumulation of wealth are the best for the whole world;
- the ownership of private property has no social obligation;
- capital speculation, liberalization and deregulation of the market, privatization of public utilities and national resources, unrestricted access for foreign investments and imports, lower taxes and the unrestricted movement of capital will achieve wealth for all;
- social obligations, protection of the poor and the weak, trade unions, and relationships between people, are subordinate to the processes of economic growth and capital accumulation.

10. This is an ideology that ... makes the false promise that it can save the world through the creation of wealth and prosperity, claiming sovereignty over life and demanding total allegiance which amounts to idolatry.

16. Speaking from our Reformed tradition and having read the signs of the times, the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches affirms that global economic justice is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and our discipleship as Christians. We believe that the integrity of our faith is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalization and therefore we confess before God and one another.

19. Therefore, we reject the current world economic order imposed by global neoliberal capitalism and any other economic system, including absolute planned economies, which defy God's covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life. We reject any claim of economic, political and military empire which subverts God's sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God's just rule.

Therefore we reject the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth that has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God's creation.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

growing in courage to live the Jesus way



Knox Church
449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
Ph. (03) 477 0229
www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net