

“Undermining an unjust economy” a sermon based on Luke 16:1-13 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 22 September 2019.

Earlier this year I heard a sermon by Brian McLaren about this text. My colleagues and I found it so compelling that I want to use McLaren’s approach today.

We are dealing with a parable. Parables are like lice. They cause us to scratch our heads. This one especially. Much here does not sound like Jesus. He seems to praise dishonesty and deceit. So let’s see it in context.

Last Sunday we heard from Luke chapter 15. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Later in chapter 15 the lost son, the lost brother. And we go then into chapter 16. It continues the same theme, the same question, of why Jesus mixes with sinners. The parables are an answer to the Pharisees criticising Jesus for hanging out with the wrong people. In chapter 16 we have two more parables, both beginning - there was a rich man.

We know the gospels are inclined to make the Pharisees sound worse than they were. They were devout people doing their best. But Luke didn’t like them. And it seems he didn’t like them because they didn’t properly value people. They tended to categorise people and dismiss them as worthless, not to be associated with. And Luke didn’t like them because in categorising people they seemed to improperly value money. Luke says they loved money. So we have the parables Jesus tells about money because some people had a problem with money.

Do we have a problem with money? Do we ever. We have a problem with money when some people are obscenely rich and millions and millions of people don’t have enough, and when millions of people die through lack of it. We have a problem with money when it seems so hard to ensure everyone has enough. This parable is for us. No wonder Jesus talks about money so much. He brings his most important and liberating messages to our problem with money. And his message is bold and blunt.

Knowing about Palestinian economics of the first century helps us understand the parable. The backdrop is the Roman occupation of Israel/ Palestine. The Romans came as occupiers. They exploited the natural resources and they exploited the labour of the people. They did it through taxation. It is hard to imagine this, but the Romans taxed the poor people while the rich people got off with paying little taxes.

The rich people lived in the south, in Judea, where the capital city and the religious centre was Jerusalem. The wealth was in the south. The poor people lived mainly in the north, where many were small farmers in Galilee. The Romans needed those farmers. They needed wine, wheat and olive oil from the farmlands of Galilee. You would think that this was a chance for the small farmers to get rich, but no. The Romans taxed the small farmers. So the farmers kept getting into financial difficulty.

And the rich people in Judea said, we will help you. We have a deal for you. We will pay your taxes, but in return for the deeds to your land. We will let you work on your land if you give us a percentage of your wheat, wine and olive oil. Wheat for Roman bread. Wine for Roman banquets. And Olive oil – there was a big market for Olive oil. The result was that the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. Very unusual! So different from our time!

Now this depended though on the capacity to collect the percentage. My most useful topic at law school was creditors' remedies, because it is one thing to be owed money. It is another to be collect that money. The rich folk would not go to collect the percentage because it wasn't safe for them to do so. They were hated by the people they were exploiting. So the rich ones in the south sent their managers, their stewards, to the farmers in the north. The middle men would say - pay up or else lose your right to work the farm.

That is the backdrop for this story. There was a rich man who had a manager. The rich man was mad at the manager because the manager wasn't putting enough pressure on the farmers. The rich people were not getting a big enough return on their investments. You can imagine the dialogue. Those poor people are too lazy – we need to make them work harder. Those poor people don't know how to manage their affairs – we need to make sure we have proper accounts. Or – I am not sure we are getting as much out of those farmers as we could get.

And so the pressure comes on the manager. The rich man tells the manager he is to be fired. I want you to get the books ready. In the meantime, the manager is just trying to earn enough to live, to get by. He is caught in the middle between the rich and the poor. And because of what the rich man says, he realises he has no job security. In the economic pyramid the manager was expendable. He didn't want to beg. He didn't want his family to starve. And the manager realises how expendable he is.

So the middle man, the manager, decides to switch sides. So at least I will have friends among the poor. So he goes up north, to the farmers. And he asks them – “How much did you owe? A hundred jugs of olive oil.” Make it fifty. “How much do you owe? A hundred containers of wheat.” Make it eighty. The manager was getting some return for the rich man, who couldn’t collect it himself, and giving a break to the poor. So this is not someone who is evil and terrible and immoral. This is someone who saw through the injustice of the economic system, who chose to switch sides and work for the poor.

Jesus says, you had better learn that money is not the measure of all things. It’s better to use money in service of relationships rather than relationships in service of money. And to make it absolutely clear he says - you cannot serve two masters.

Jesus uses strong language - you will either hate god and love money or love god and hate money. Now we all have to use money. But if we take seriously what Jesus says, then there is a sense in which we need to wash our hands when we take out your wallet. Money can make us dirty by the way we use it wrongly to value certain things. Money has power.

The rich man looks at rivers, soil and mountains and asks – how can I convert them for short-term profit. Whereas for Jesus the creation has inherent value. The value of creation does not depend on its monetary value.

Jesus shows how the kingdom of God has its own economic system. He invites all of us to lose faith in a system that says let the rich do whatever they want and let the crumbs trickle down to the rest of the people. In the kingdom everyone matters.

The more we live in that kingdom the more we lose faith in the system that makes the rich richer. Put God at the top and everything else will have a new value and have its rightful place. Realise that we are totally expendable off the backs of those below us, and see things differently.

You will be set free from that system, if you love god first. Because loving God, you will see everything else in a new value system. When you love God first then you put money in its proper place.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN
called to be a community of Jesus



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

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