Sermon notes

The writer of Ecclesiastes – who calls himself Qohelet – was a very rich man. He was a son of King David, perhaps Solomon himself, at the time when the Israelite Royal family was at its very richest. But this man who had everything, considered life to be empty of meaning: “Meaningless, everything is meaningless” he lamented (Eccles 1.1), complaining that no matter how much water goes into the sea, the sea levels never rise. How different his age from ours, when the water level gives community leaders sleepless nights. He notes that wind goes round and round the world, and never ends up anywhere. This image of the restless wind interchanges, gradually, with the image of restless money, and its futility. A modern parable: you can pay more than £25000 for a watch, but the same seconds tick by for you as pass for the person who will never own a watch.

Relative poverty is when money does not stretch far enough to meet basic needs. We often see this kind of poverty in the UK, and it can affect both working and non-working people.[[1]](#footnote-1) One global measure of poverty is having less than $2.50 per day, and half the people in the world – 3 billion people – fall short of that amount. As Oxfam discovered to their shock in 2017, the world’s 8 richest men have as much money as the 3.6 billion poorest people.[[2]](#footnote-2) Oxfam called that disparity of wealth “obscene”, and we might wonder what Jesus would call it.

Through our global partners, the Council for World Mission, members of the URC have been thinking about an “Economy of Life”, how can the financial and economic “architecture” of our world bring about the fullness of life that Jesus wants for us? Along with partner churches in the UK and Carribean regions, we wrote and signed up to the Kingston Declaration.[[3]](#footnote-3) Among commitments to self-education, to study and learn more about alternatives to the current economic system, we also committee to act to change our local and world economies. The following snippet is from the Declaration:

“We have recognized that our churches are moved quickly to poverty alleviation, but that we must move not only towards poverty intervention, but to desire and seek poverty eradication. It is not enough even ‘to teach a human being to fish’ if the water in which it swims is polluted, and the pond has been land grabbed by the wealthy. We must cease to be complicit in subsistence.”

Do the words of the declaration resonate for you? Through Commitment for Life, your (*our/this*) church is taking part in poverty intervention – building up communities to change their lives for the long term. Buying Fair Trade is another way we try to reshape the global economy. Perhaps, then, a “New International Financial and Economic Architecture” for the world is not impossible.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The rich man of Ecclesiastes, feeling old, sees how chasing wealth leads to sleepless nights. A man with millions tucked under his mattress has to sleep with one eye on the bedroom door. He believes that his day labourers get a better sleep than he does, presumably because they do back-breaking work. From his position of privilege, he cannot imagine how stressful casual work is, even as he knows that overseers and corrupt officials frequently exploit the workforce (Eccles 5.8-9). Often, in modern economic thinking and even in our own minds, the poor are chided for bad decision making. In recent years, a controlled scientific study, which showed that the effect on thinking skills of insomnia and the effect of living in poverty are equivalent, both causing the person under stress to lose IQ points.[[5]](#footnote-5) People cannot experience life in all its fullness when money is sapping their imagination, and thinking power.

The rich man’s biggest worry is that all his labour will be for nothing. Like the parable of the man who built a bigger barn that Jesus told some centuries later, the rich man knows that you can’t take it with you (Eccles 5.15). He is also anxious that a financial crisis or a bad decision could wipe everything out and leave nothing behind. He would know the worry some have that the cost care home fees will mean that they can’t afford to leave a house behind for their children, and perhaps would be tempted instead to spend the money on a set of cruises now, to make sure the government couldn’t take it later. What is a wise use of our money, and what is a jealous use of it? Money often inspires deep emotions, and we are wise to test our own motives when we feel strongly about saving or spending.

The conclusion of our reading is the notion that wealth and possessions are a blessing from God, and should be enjoyed while you have them – a seize the day attitude to money and opportunity. Mistaking wealth for blessing is the mindset of unexamined privilege.[[6]](#footnote-6) This member of a royal household is not rich by his own merit, or labour, or by earned blessedness in the eyes of God. His is inherited wealth, and inherited privilege. Unless we are self-aware, it is easy not to recognise our own privilege and instead to see only our earned achievements. I – the author of these sermon notes – can honestly say I worked hard to get my education, but the happenstance of the place and time of my birth made it far easier for me to get to university than a woman of the same intelligence born into poverty in Bangladesh or Guatemala. When we count our blessings, and name them one by one, do we enumerate the ways in which our blessings are ours by chance and not merit?

There is an echo of our experience of God’s grace in the realisation that blessings are not earned. Theologies of grace remind us that we receive forgiveness from God and are loved by God because God has decided it will be so, and we cannot do anything to earn either of these things. When Jesus said: a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God. – he pointed our thinking in a similar direction. True abundance is about our awareness of the Divine, and is not measured in earthly wealth. That is the treasure in heaven (Matt 6.19-21) which Jesus introduced in his sermon on the mount.

Better, then, to think of earthly wealth not as a treasure or a blessing, but as a responsibility, a stewardship task. God cares what we do with our money, and what our money gets up to as it travels round the world. Returning to the Kingston Declaration, it contained a challenge:

We hear again Jesus forcing us to choose between Caesar and God in the ordering of our money (Matt 22.21). We cannot affirm the accumulation of wealth as an end to be desired, we must desire an ‘Economy of Life’ that desires life in all its fullness for all God’s creation.

Is our commitment for life one that seeks to change the global economy, and one that keeps us conscious that our money and our use of it always, already shape the world? Let that image of life in all its fullness for all God’s creation be one that shapes your decision making the next time you open your wallet, perhaps every time you open it, as we continue to pray that God’s will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

*This service is prepared for Commitment for Life by Revd Dr Catherine Lewis-Smith.*

1. In 2015-16, The UK government figures on different poverty measures are:
10.4 million people were in relative low income Before Housing Costs (16% of the population).
9.3 million were in absolute low income BHC (15%).

14.0 million were in relative low income After Housing Costs (22%).

12.8 million were in absolute low income AHC (20%).
http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN07096 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2017-01-16/just-8-men-own-same-wealth-half-world [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.urc.org.uk/images/MissionCouncil/May2017/I3-Mission-Kingston\_declaration.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://cwmeurope.org/what-we-do/new-international-financial-and-economic-architecture-nifea/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://bigthink.com/ideafeed/what-poverty-and-insomnia-have-in-common [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a short comic style story demonstrating “privilege” see http://thewireless.co.nz/articles/the-pencilsword-on-a-plate [↑](#footnote-ref-6)