

16 September 2023

## **Abundant Belonging (Matthew 6. 19-21, 24-34)**

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‘As far as possible, we ought to live as we believe we should live in a liberated world, in the form of our own existence, with all the unavoidable contradictions and conflicts that result from this’.<sup>1</sup> These are the words of German philosopher, Theodor Adorno, writing in the mid-twentieth century. Adorno was a fierce critic of both fascism and contemporary Western culture. He was deeply engaged in studies of authoritarianism, antisemitism, the question of German responsibility for the Holocaust and matters of public policy.<sup>2</sup> Though Adorno believed that the endeavour to live as in a liberated world will necessarily meet opposition, he also said ‘there is no option but to work through this opposition to the bitter end’. Mohandas Gandhi expressed essentially the same idea more simply: ‘Be the change you want to see’.

This year’s Season of Creation focuses on the theme ‘Let Justice and Peace Flow’. At Benedictus, we’re exploring the question: if this is the change we want to see, the flowing of justice and peace for all people and all the earth, then how do we help realise this new world in the midst of all that contradicts and opposes it? How do we live now in accord with the fuller reality Jesus calls ‘the kingdom of God’?

Last week, we saw that on the biblical account one of the prime blockers of the flow of life is the human tendency to accumulate wealth and hoard things for private gain, to possess the world’s goods at the expense of others. It’s not that all ownership is wrong or that basic human needs for security, home, the tools of trade and the means of creative expression must be given up. But the problem is that our possessing and accumulating all too often get bound up with the drive to be wholly self-sufficient and self-securing, and so with constant anxiety about whether we have ‘enough’. The world’s spiritual teachers connect the mentality of possession with

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2001), p.191.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodor\\_W.\\_Adorno](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodor_W._Adorno)

tendencies to become devouring and self-centred. And this not only leads to the exploitation and diminishment of other lives, but it diminishes us as well. It gets in the way of our sense of belonging to and responsibility for the whole. Thus the fairly constant refrain in Jesus' teaching of the necessity of sitting lightly to your possessions, giving up attachment to having and being willing to entrust yourself more radically to God's provision.

In the abstract, we get this – it rings true. But for those of us who 'have', voluntary dispossession isn't easy to practise. The choice to let go even some of our wealth and security involves risk and renunciation, a disciplining of desire and the facing of fear. And yet, it's not all about renunciation. Jesus says: 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven' (Matthew 6.19-20). As if there's a different kind of wealth available, a different kind of security. But what is that? Is Jesus talking about earning spiritual brownie points? As if we'll be rewarded in the life hereafter for self-sacrifice and righteously delayed gratification? Or is he speaking about another possibility entirely – a different quality of abundance, an abundance of belonging and a wealth of connection?

Remember the story of Jesus and the rich young ruler who asked what he needed to do to secure eternal life (Matthew 19.16ff)? He went away sad because he couldn't bear to do as Jesus asked; sell his possessions and entrust himself to Jesus' way. But the rest of the story is interesting. According to Matthew's gospel, 'Then [Jesus' disciple] Peter said ... "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"' (Matthew 19.27). This sounds as though Peter, despite having given away much, is still locked in the mentality of possessing. What will be our reward for being so good? What treasure is in store for us?

Jesus at first seems to answer him at that level. You will have places of honour in the coming kingdom, he says, 'and everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life' (Matthew 19.29). But what does this mean? Is Jesus really promising his disciples a 100% increase in the quantity of things they

will possess as they used to possess their status, their goods and chattels? Or is he speaking of the possibility of a shift in the quality of their relationship to everything?

Listen again to the reading we heard earlier. '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. Therefore I tell you', Jesus says, 'do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?' (Matthew 6.24-25). It's as if a direct corollary of giving up anxiety about securing our 'treasures on earth' is an awakening to a much larger sense of what life is and a vastly expanded relationship to the whole. 'Look at the birds of the air' (Matthew 6.25). Writing of the radical possessionless-ness of Francis of Assisi, Dorothee Soelle comments: 'His goal was not an aimless and self-delighted asceticism', asceticism as an end in itself; 'rather, he sought to live the vulnerable openness of love that gives itself without condition, protection, and reassurance'. This 'vulnerable openness' returns you to everything, to seeing all the earth as kin. Brother Sun, Sister Moon. It removes 'the boundary between sacredness and profanity', Soelle writes and 'ridicules social division built up on the basis of possessions'.<sup>3</sup>

'To come to possess all', wrote St John of the Cross, 'desire to possess nothing. To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing'. And there seems something at least analogous here in ways of knowing and being practised by indigenous peoples. In his extraordinary book, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*, Tyson Yunkaporta writes: 'This is the perspective you need to be a custodian rather than an owner of lands, communities or knowledge. [Custodianship] demands the relinquishing of artificial power and control, immersion in the astounding patterns of creation that only emerge through the free movement of all agents and elements within a system'.<sup>4</sup> 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow', Jesus said (Matthew 6.28).

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<sup>3</sup> Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, p.241.

<sup>4</sup> Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2019), p.94.

It's often said that our current ecological crisis has its roots in the way industrial modernity has weakened humanity's sense of being part of the web of life. We become owners and consumers, rather than recipients of gift and participants in the created world. Michael Northcott writes: 'industrial humans increasingly experience their identity in terms of the things that they have acquired, instead of in their being creatures', sharing the life of earth.<sup>5</sup> And Rowan Williams remarks: 'Many of the things which have moved us towards ecological disaster have been distortions in our sense of who and what we are ... [T]heir overall effect has been to isolate us more and more from the reality we're part of'. If this is so, then 'our response to the crisis needs to be, in the most basic sense, a reality check, a re-acquaintance with the facts of our interdependence within the material world and a rediscovery of our responsibility for it'.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, to let justice and peace flow requires that we rediscover a live sense of being 'members of one another', custodians of the common-wealth. This rediscovery isn't just an idea. It's a lived experience of belonging that becomes available to us as we let go the temptation to clutch at a tiny fraction of what's given. This is the treasure that becomes available as we become open to wonder at, enjoy and share the astonishing plenty of the whole. As happened for me one night sleeping out in central Australia, waking up to look at the stars and feeling myself simultaneously utterly poor and insignificant, and yet fully at home and welcome, part of the family of things. And this shift in the quality of our relationship to everything, makes a difference to how we see and think and act in daily life. It makes us care more about where our food is sourced, where our refuse goes, how our consumption impacts the whole. Pope Francis writes: 'We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Rowan Williams, 'Climate crisis: fashioning a Christian response' in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp.196-207, p.204.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, 'Climate crisis', p.204.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, An Encyclical Letter on Ecology and Climate, Australian edition (Strathfield: St Paul's Publications, 2015), p.165.

From this perspective, the fact that our environmentally caring actions seem too local and small to 'save the planet' isn't the essential point. What matters is that we are living as in a liberated world, and making this world visible to and habitable by others. Or as Jesus put it, we are seeking first the kingdom of God, the flow of God's justice and peace, where that which we really need is already given.