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No Bag for Your Journey (Matthew 10. 5-10)

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‘Let Justice and Peace Flow’. This year’s theme for the Season of Creation sets forth a vision of earthly well-being that is both integrated and abundant. Integrated in the sense that it recognises the interdependence of ecological with social justice, and of justice with peace. Abundant in the sense that justice and peace, truly and generously practised, quite naturally overflow in the increase of life. It’s the vision of the psalmist who knows that when mercy and truth are met together, and justice and peace have kissed each other, goodness happens and the land yields its plenty. (Ps. 85. 10, 12). As I said last week, in our era of deepening ecological and social crisis, this vision calls us to action as well as prayer, to a transformation of lifestyle as well as of consciousness.

I confess, however, that I don’t find it easy to prepare reflections on this theme for our community. Over the years at Benedictus we’ve reflected many times about the ecological crisis and the urgent need for us, collectively, to change our ways. Directly and indirectly, most of us are already taking at least some action, while also seeking to keep living faithfully through bouts of ecological grief, fear and despair, through our sense of rage or powerlessness in the face of diabolically vested interests, while also continuing to celebrate and enjoy life’s gifts. Most of us wrestle with what in our lifestyles we can and must change, with whether we’ve sacrificed enough, and with the question of the difference our actions really make.

So for me, standing here before you, what’s left to say in our context? What might serve our continuing discernment of the response required of us? What might invite a deepening of our commitment and hope? There’s a sense in which I’ve got nothing wholly new. But perhaps returning to some basics is helpful. And by basics, I mean the understanding of the human condition and the disciplines necessary to fulfil the human vocation proclaimed by our religious tradition. This is a tradition that’s always concerned for justice and peace, always concerned for the redress of injustice

and the increase of life. This tradition knows in its bones that the aliveness of the world and the well-being of the human family can only lastingly be found in connection with the source of all life. What enables that connection and what blocks it is the constant concern of the law and the prophets, of Jesus and the church. In the next few weeks, I'd like to explore elements of this imaginative and practical framework for human and ecological well-being, beginning with the question of what and how we 'have'.

The reading we just heard comes from instructions given by Jesus to those he's sending on their first solo mission trip. He's commissioning his twelve disciples to represent him and bear his message 'to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. The message is the good news that the 'kingdom of God has come near'. Its signs, which they're to perform, include healing for the sick, life from death, cleansing from that which corrupts and isolates people, and freedom from possession by malevolent spirits. Jesus has come to proclaim and realise new possibilities for life on earth, by unsnarling what blocks the flow of God's goodness in the created order. His disciples are being given a part in making that reality visible, helping actively to bring it about. Yet here's the kicker. The condition of them being able to do this is that they remain connected to the source of the life they proclaim. And this means relinquishing any attempt to secure their own lives and provision apart from reliance on what's given. 'Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or staff' (Matthew 10.9-10).

This call to trust radically in God's provision by consenting to radical possessionless-ness sounds right through the biblical story. Think of the manna in the wilderness that showered down freely on the people of Israel as long as they only took what they needed, but which became foul and filled with maggots when they tried to hoard it for the next day (Exodus 16.20). Think of Jesus' many teachings about the foolishness of storing up 'treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal' (Matthew 6.19); his call to the rich young ruler to sell all he possessed if he wished for eternal life (Matthew 19. 21), and his insistence that you cannot serve both God and wealth (Matthew 6.24).

‘Many religious traditions regard possessions as something damaging to the soul’, notes German theologian Dorothee Soelle; ‘poverty is held up as an ideal’. Why? She goes on: ‘Possession occupies those who possess.... Even things that make daily life and work easier are seen to be a kind of seduction into the mentality of possessors and [an] existence shaped by having. Buddhism calls this craving, and the traditions of Judaism and Christianity call it avarice’.¹ In other words, the danger with the habit of possession is that it tends to voraciousness. ‘The ego loses its benign distance from things to be used and is ruled by the urge to possess them. This rapidly infects other aspects of life’.² The world’s spiritual teachers connect the mentality of possessors with tendencies to become devouring and self-centred, with diminished awareness of interdependence and of being in relation to the whole.

It’s important to remember that this traditional teaching on possessionlessness ‘always distinguished clearly between voluntarily chosen poverty’ or simplicity of life and the kind of deprivation and want ‘into which people are thrown without being asked’.³ Jesus said that the labourer deserves his food, and the prophets of Israel rage against the exploitation of the poor and unjustly dispossessed. A little surprisingly, even Simone Weil – one of the austere of twentieth century spiritual teachers, who was profoundly inspired by ‘the spirit of poverty’ she saw in St Francis of Assisi and desired to share the same condition of a vagabond and beggar⁴ – saw private property as ‘a vital need of the soul’ for the majority of people. ‘The soul feels isolated, lost, if it is not surrounded by objects which seem to it like an extension of the bodily members’, she wrote as part of her manifesto for the reconstruction of France after the war.⁵ Once this is recognised, she goes on, ‘this implies for everyone the possibility of possessing something more than the articles of ordinary consumption. The forms this ... takes can vary considerably ... but it is desirable that the majority of people

¹ Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2001), pp.233-234.

² Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, p.234.

³ Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, p.236.

⁴ Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, p.252.

⁵ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, trans. A.F. Wills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), p.33.

should own their own home and a little piece of land round it, and, whenever not technically impossible, the tools of their trade'.⁶

So where does this lead us? We live in a society which tolerates, on the one hand, entrenched injustice and involuntary poverty for many people. Those without work are expected to live on a begrudged pittance; workers, from delivery drivers to university lecturers, are exploited by the gig economy and casualization of labour, and the prospect of home ownership for the majority of young and working people is ever receding. At the same time, it's a society and economic paradigm which, far from praising voluntary poverty or even moderation and simplicity of life, constantly pushes us in the direction of having more, consuming more, positing wealth 'creation' as (effectively) an end in itself. Pope Francis perceptively diagnoses what underlies our entrapment in this dynamic. He writes: 'The current global situation engenders a feeling of instability and uncertainty, which in turn becomes "a seedbed for collective selfishness". When people become self-centred and self-enclosed, their greed increases. The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume'.⁷ They substitute 'having' for 'being'. But this compulsive consumerism only compounds our experience of isolation and threat. 'Obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction',⁸ including of the natural world.

So again, where does this lead us? How might we bear possibilities for healing in the midst of our diseased 'techno-economic paradigm'.⁹ Let me suggest three things to ponder. The first concerns our relationship to what we do possess. According to Pope Francis, there is a legitimate right to private property, but the Church also teaches 'that there is always a social mortgage on all private property, in order that goods may serve the general purpose that God gave them'.¹⁰ And this general purpose

⁶ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p.33.

⁷ 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.160.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p.161.

⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p.159.

¹⁰ Citing Pope John Paul II, Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p.80.

necessarily includes the sustenance of all life. As the psalmist puts it, ‘the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof’ (Ps. 24.1), given to all equally. If we’re going to be rightly and freely related to anything we possess, then this entails recognising all that we have as ‘gift’, ‘on loan so to speak’,¹¹ and in service of our own and others’ participation in and enjoyment of the gift of life itself.

Consequently, this unavoidably raises the question of what and how much we possess. If private ownership is a penultimate good, if creation is ‘a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone’, then a society in which 10% of the population owns half the nation’s private wealth, while 60% of people own just 16%, cannot reflect the justice of God. And for some of us, this raises uncomfortable questions. I may not be in the top 10%, but I have more than I need. Though, how much super is actually enough? How much should I have set aside for a rainy day? The whole paradigm we live in pushes us, as I’ve said, in the direction of having just that bit more security ... just one spare tunic, a second pair of sandals, a bag for the journey ... isn’t that just sensible? Or is it?

And this, finally, raises the question of what Dorothee Soelle calls ‘a mysticism of the middle way’.¹² As Simone Weil recognised, not everyone is called to a life of radical possessionlessness. But the more we become present to the insanity of compulsive consumerism and rampant inequality as somehow built into our economic system, the more we will experience the yearning to follow a way of simplicity. And this must show itself in what we give away and the limits on our consumption, as well as in how we use and invest what we do have for the sake of the life of all. What exactly that looks like for each of us will differ. But if we are serious about letting ‘justice and peace flow’, then these are questions each of us must engage. Jesus sent his disciples, he said, ‘like sheep in the midst of wolves’; bearing his message of peace in the midst of violent social norms. May our feet too be guided in the way of peace.

¹¹ Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, p.236.

¹² Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, p.252.