

Possessions

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Job 23:1-9,15-16; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:35-45

When I first started thinking about today's readings, what first attracted my attention was three vivid, and rather odd, images.

The first image was in Job where it says in verse 8 that he searched for God by going forward and backwards, and left and right. What the heck does that mean?

The second striking image is Jesus' famous one about there being about as much chance of a rich person entering the Kingdom of Heaven as there is of a camel going through the eye of a needle.

It's interesting that these rather mysterious images both emerge out of stories of rich men who face losing everything they own, and who are both for their own reasons, searching for God.

Old Testament Job, who started out very rich indeed, had it all taken from him, and Job was looking for God basically to berate him for being unjust. By contrast, the as yet still comfortable New Testament rich young man comes to his crisis after asking a dangerously redemptive question. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

In one of Jesus' replies to that question we get a perfect example of the third powerful image, the one from Hebrews, which describes the word of God as being a living, double-edged sword that cuts right into our deepest places and sifts the purposes of our hearts.

The sword is unsheathed when Jesus says to the young man, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

To give the rich young man his due, at least he took the message seriously, and went away shocked and grieving, his heart well and truly sifted. By comparison, I know this is where I tend to come badly unstuck.

Take Jesus' injunction to the rich young man seriously and personally, and you too may find it's a tar baby.

Why haven't I given up everything I own to the poor? "I know that mere things are not important", part of me says. "I could give things up if I needed to." And, actually, I *think* and *hope* that is true. So "then why haven't you" the living word of God ruthlessly says, as the sword pierces deeper.

Keep pondering, and you, like me, may find yourself wondering why it is we have this problem with owning things, and from there to what it is that really makes us tick.

At this point I have to point out that I am very aware that sermonising on this topic, when I am still among the very comfortably off, leaves me in a very awkward position to say the least. Please feel free though to call me a Pharisee and a viper!

One obvious reason I have things is because I want. I like pleasurable experiences and things undoubtedly help to get many of these and sustain them. And our consumer society eggs this on by bombarding us with images of how to become happy, most of which revolve around spending money. If only we could just get to that tropical beach, or buy that car then "oh what a feeling".

A second reason why I own things is because of all the things I don't want; things like being cold, hungry, having to worry about the next meal, becoming uncomfortable or sick and so on. I want to be secure.

Put these two things together and we have the world's path to happiness which we might call the path of want /not want. Want, want want. Safe, safe, safe.

I put it like this deliberately to sound slightly compulsive. We do develop ingrained habits and patterns of thought and behaviour. And we become caught in those patterns, partly by our possessions, and addicted to the behaviours, and after a while we don't even see it, let alone understand how it works.

But actually these things don't really work. We all know that at some level we are not entirely satisfied. The only thing that in these circumstances keeps us spiritually alive is the nagging sensation, running like an underground stream, that maybe this world of things is not quite what it seems. Is this all there is to life — collecting pleasant experiences and trying to insulate ourselves against unpleasant ones? And nor can things make us safe. We are all at least subject to old age, sickness and death. And we cannot be protected from the vicissitudes of life. Just ask the people in Bali. And so, like the rich young man, some of us go looking for wise people to tell us where our true home may be. While the rich young man's question is a universal one, it resonates particularly for us in the affluent West.

A third reason I have things is because they sort of relate to me. My choices of house, car, clothing, books, music etc all have come out of some sort of sense of who I think I am. In this way my things also contribute to my contentment to some extent because they create a sense of stability for my ego. "Look at everything you have achieved and acquired and be proud" says that particular little voice.

And when someone threatens to something that is MINE I get defensive, resentful and ANGRY. Particularly if that something is very near or dear to me. If you don't think this happens to you then please let me know and I will happily take to your car windscreen with a bat after church [smile]

If anything things get worse when we consider our mental possessions. For example our ambitions, treasured memories, secret fantasies, grudges and deep seated ideas of who we are and how we think we should be treated.

Job is wonderful example of this. Until Satan tested him, it seemed Job had it all. He was rich, respected and kept the commandments perfectly. It seemed he had found both God and the pattern for contentment. Job lost his possessions in two phases — first his huge herds were stolen and his 10 beautiful children were killed. Most people could not have coped with this. But Job was so holy he could. So then his health and reputation were taken away. In Chapter 2 of the Book of Job which we heard last week he becomes covered in boils and an object of ridicule even to people he had previously thought beneath him. Now interestingly he did not come straight out and blame God. He was too holy for that. Instead, he suppressed his feelings of resentment. So now, by the time of today's reading in Chapter 23 he has become bitter. With his sense of dignity gone even holy Job's responses have become the big ego one of anger, and pride. And so, for all his internal searching forward and back he just encounters darkness within darkness.

We could describe all of this as the second path false path to contentment, the path of me/my/mine. It doesn't work either. For one thing it's very vulnerable. But more importantly, even when it seems to work all it has really done is to create a narrow cell whose walls are covered in mirrors.

Actually, it is not surprising that these two paths do not work, because our church tradition calls them the world and the devil, and we forswear them at baptism. And that same church tradition would give the elements of these two paths of want/not want and me/my/mine the following names : avarice, gluttony, envy, anger and pride. They are all intimately implicated in possession. Possession is a good word because once these deadly dispositions have truly taken hold, it becomes almost impossible to see where we end, and they begin.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus' one line injunction to sell everything and give it to the poor has us exploring what's important to us, who we are, and how the world snares us. The word of God really is a double-edged sword and, taken seriously, it really does pierce deep into us — to a place where life and Spirit, joints and marrow divide. To the place between us and our things. To the place between our true self, and the manifestations of what we think we are in the world.

Yet again, it seems Jesus has made a powerful and personalised call to repentance. [It is, as our gospel hymn put it, a healing word that calls us to repentance and to see a new pattern.] A challenge, particularly to affluent people like me, to start seeing see ourselves as we truly are — as prisoners of our dispositions and our things — and to get us to want to change — to be healed, to learn how to live.

And that is where the real problem comes in. We don't want to change. It's hard. And we almost certainly will all invoke the defence of "it's just not practical" — which is largely true because it is very hard to live in our society and bring up kids etc without things. But it is not an excuse for sheer inertia (or sloth to use the language of the deadly sins).

One of the really useful things about Jesus' instruction is that it is unmistakably not just about theorising and investigating (although this is useful as far as it goes). It was not just philosophy or psychology or morality. Rather, it was, like all good religion, an injunction to act.

I am not about to tell you to sell all you own and give it away when I have not done this myself. But I do want to start. In figuring out how to start, I am one of those people who needs to try and make it a little more palatable and practical.

I recently heard a simile I liked about the journey in the spirit. It's a bit like trying to go up in a hot air balloon. A large part of this involves dropping the rocks of our possessions we have in our baskets.

Looked at this way, Jesus statement about the difficulties of entering the kingdom with things makes more sense. You cannot get the balloon very high if it is full of heavy rocks, let alone get it up to the point where all perspectives completely change.

One of the great things about people who have renounced the world — like monks and nuns and saints — is that they show us how it is in fact possible to give things away, and they still inspire us to move as far down that path as we feel we can. On the whole they tend not to be, as the world sees them, tragic figures that have traded pleasures in this life for uncertain benefits in the next. No, most of them actually seem to have been very happy in this life. (Think of St Francis.) They enjoyed giving things up. Perhaps as the balloon goes higher, the view gets better.

Even if we do not leave church today so totally inspired as to sell everything we own and give it to the poor, we can at least start going down the path of renunciation — by starting to develop a disciplined habit and mindset of letting go, clearing out, and giving away.

There are actually concrete benefits in doing this. Benefits like building our sense of self-esteem as we learn that we can give things away, and that we can be different and go against social conventions. And giving stuff away can actually feel good. Whether it is external things, or internal baggage, letting go reduces clutter. It creates space. It gives a sense of freedom from things. It reduces complexity. It helps us to let go of past baggage and to live more fully in the present. It is the path of escape from want/don't want and me/my/mine. Every time we drop a rock we go a bit higher.

And giving up things can provide some practical opportunities to learn interesting things about ourselves. For example, when I tried to clear out a stack of old books to the church fete next weekend (hint, hint!), I sometimes found myself running into resistance, even with quite odd items. This was a useful opportunity to start investigating why I felt that resistance. What were the feelings involved? Why were they attached to that particular book and what lay behind them? Sometimes the answers were surprising and I learned something about myself.

So let's start practicing! Slowly at first, but regularly, so as to get the patterns in our mind to change. As we feel comfortable, drop, let go, and simplify. And pay attention to what happens.

As our minds really start to change, perhaps we may make the discovery of the monks and saints that giving (particularly in response to genuine need), simplicity, letting go, learning to love, and going beyond ourselves all came from the same, strangely energising place — a deep, beautiful, still place within us and yet beyond. The place where our Master dwells — the Master who showed the path of renunciation by accepting evil on himself, dying on a cross and becoming reborn in the Spirit. Whatever we may lose in terms of comfort, pleasure and security gets repaid with a growing sense of freedom, clarity, intuition, and a growing sense of a greater pattern at work.

And maybe in all this we have a key to the mystery of the three images I mentioned at the beginning. The first beatitude says that it is the poor in spirit who get to see the Kingdom of Heaven. The poor in spirit who are so small that they can go through the eye of a needle. Those who can dwell in the place where there is no going forward or back or left or right or standing still — the place where the flesh and the spirit divide.

Let's leave the last words on this path of grand poverty to Job, whose problem was how to see, and then discard, a particularly massive rock, his sense of victim-hood which he had nursed to the point where it had become his treasure. Job's last reported words in Chapter 42 — a long 19 chapters after today's reading — were:

“I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”