

Pastoral letter on Giving

'Money makes the world go round,' goes the saying. For the church, the relationship with money is a complicated one. While a lot has been said, a lot more can and indeed should be said as spending habits and our attitudes towards money change along with the culture. The church has often spoken against materialism, which attracts criticism as it comes under scrutiny for its own budget and ethical decision-making.

On the one hand, the church is the voice of societal reason, like the ancient Greek story of King Midas who turned everything to gold with his mere touch, or like African folklore telling of the greed of Monkey and the cunning schemes of Fox. These stories serve to demonstrate the eventual tragedy of not being conscientious about resources, unbridled desire, and pride. Of course, very few people would admit having a spending problem, but the statistics speak for society.

The global financial crisis of 2008 was a rude awakening to how an unregulated financial system can result in great tragedy. Since then, economics has dominated the political agenda, disguised in narratives of immigration, race and gender identity. During his tenure President Trump advocated for the exclusive interests of the USA. While many in the world thought that was an excessive use of power considering his nation's position at the top of the global economy, South Africa has recently sought to make the bureaucratic process for foreign workers more stringent. This has been brought to height because of the economic devastation Covid-19 caused. Likewise, developed nations are accused of hoarding vaccines, and looking to their own interests.

On the other hand, the church does not seem that dissimilar from the economic systems, asking for its due, albeit using spiritual tact. The church as an organisation has many secular responsibilities, like the maintenance of its buildings, staff salaries, municipal fees, and office costs, which many worshippers take for granted. The reality is that St George's, like the church at large is struggling financially. We are currently operating on approximately a 25% budget deficit. A simple calculation will prove that this is not sustainable. This is not unique to St George's, and among other reasons why the Diocese is in the process of clustering parishes together in order to share resources.

An administrative strategy should always coincide with social projections and a philosophical/theological rationale. The basic argument has frequently been that if the church offered a meaningful contribution to people's lives, they would contribute financially towards its upkeep, pastoral ministry, and role in representing the stakeholders' values in society. A feature though of a postmodern society is that church has become something of a leisure activity or a spiritual enterprise that offers its clients means of self-actualisation and betterment in their personal lives. The contemporary church competes with other self-help gurus and popular psychologists with their practical and concise tips to improve one's life as the average middle- and upper class person

struggles to balance work, family, and personal life in an ever attempt to reach a place of happiness.

As our culture, financial systems, and lives are imbalanced, we pay for more services, whether it is a nanny, an Uber, or someone/-thing that can relieve us of duties. The result can sometimes be catastrophic as relationships or our health fall apart. It makes perfectly sense to me when people decline to commit in giving time or money to the church. I see it in my own family and life. I am becoming increasingly unsettled, because the system is broken. I am alarmed because it goes against the grain of what wholesome life should be, and what the church believes. It therefore asks for a fundamental shift in our lives and worldview. During this year's Lent course, titled 'Slow Church,' I had hoped it would create greater awareness of the 'McDonaldization' of our culture.

The church is certainly in need of your financial support, otherwise in just a few years its cultural footprint will become obsolete or disappear (if the closure of churches is something you care about or impact your life), yet on a deeper level St George's is not asking for your money, but rather Christ is asking to be lord of your life. While I cannot claim to speak so directly for God, I chose a vocation in the church and desire to guide people in a life that is truly free. Not free of cares, but free from being captive to a system. I am filled with hope that Christ has the power to transform people's lives, where every breath, cent, and action establish the kingdom of God in society. It asks for a radical review of the economy of our lives, what makes for the good life, and why we pursue wealth.

I am not against wealth, but the control money has over us. If we could live in an open economy of trust, not of fear and hoarding, we would truly experience Sabbath's shalom. Some things' value don't always add up, and the economy isn't exactly rational, therefore in utilising our resources to serve grace, we experience much greater fulfilment than partaking in the latest consumer trends. This will free us of debt and stress, of the desire for recognition and 'gas lighting' en masse that denies borderline burnout and anxiety disorder. We need a new worldview.

The church cannot claim exclusivity in this regard, and if by doing so slyly go stand in front of the queue for a hand-out. The church is just a part in God's vision for a better world, where resources don't become infectious, poisonous and destructive, but sustainable means of flourishing. The complexity of church money is the tension between the Church being made up of living stones, humans interlinked and dependent on one another that will continue to exist even if the institutional church should become marginal in a post-Christian society, and the church as an organisation that can be an immense resource in the hands of the Church, the body of Christ, seeking to change the world for themselves, their children, and their neighbours striving to live freely and prosperously.

Some church historians have pointed out that the church undergoes a reformation approximately every 500 years - which makes a paradigm shift immanent. Adapting to a culture changing faster than ever, it requires moving

the centre of belief to where the church becomes the expression of people living as Christ in the world, resourcing and equipping it in anticipation of radical movements.

Practically, it requires the revaluing of our goods; the reprioritising in our personal budgets, and the reallocation of our time so that God is at the top, centre and bottom. Such a definition can of course be practically ambiguous because surely God wants the best for my family and me and evidently blesses me considering my upward social mobility. However, I believe the true Church of Christ sacrifices that which it normally could enjoy and benefit from so that a much greater good, personally and collectively can be achieved. For many years, especially as a teenager I resented my parents for not buying me brand name clothing and expensive gifts, until I realised some years later as a theological student, that they prioritised giving their lives to God, serving in multiple ministries, being generously hospitable, and in the process safeguarding me from perhaps a life lived selfishly.

Our lifestyles have of course political bearing, but this letter is not to advocate for any ideological position or human-made social theory. My hope is that we all will be and become wealthy, but that it will serve grace, and this asks of us to reconsider our affiliations. Accompanying this letter is an application form for 'Dedicated Giving' to St George's. Please consider pledging to be a regular giver to sustain the church that you call your own, a community you are part of that enjoys the collective benefits of the church, and as a sign of repentance that you count the cost of being a disciple of Christ the most important thing in your life, securing an eternal legacy and joy for your soul.

Times of vulnerability offers us, indeed forces us, to rethink what matters. I pray that we will be like shining stars in a desperate world in need of hope and a better way than individualistic consumption and self-interest. We can turn the tide.

Rev Eben
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