

Finding the “way” in a consumerist society

Paul Kelly’s song, “From little things big things grow” tells the story of Vincent Lingiari and his leadership among Gurindji cattle workers who went on strike initially for fair pay, and over eight years of struggle, for recognition of their rights to the land on which they worked for rations and two dollars a day.

The Gurindji walked away, on strike, cut through fence wire, set up a sign and built a shelter. It took many years before the Gurindji received equal pay for their work – the minimum wage; and eight years before the Labor Whitlam government commenced drafting legislation for land rights.

The process of dispossession of Indigenous Australians from the land to which they belonged commenced in 1788 and continued well into the twentieth century until Land Rights legislation was enacted in the 1970s under the Whitlam and Fraser governments.

The impact of dispossession of land, language and culture continues today in the intergenerational trauma, discrimination and prejudice experienced by too many Indigenous Australians. Yet, relationships between First Nations and those of us later arrivals have improved during my lifetime. But there is still much to do. Do we, who proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, have a special responsibility towards those who are the least in our nation, and in our world? How do we find the way in a consumerist society?

To participate in a consumerist society, you have to have some income and some wealth. The question is how much is enough? And how does faith guide the answer to that question? Ironically, as I was writing this homily, I had a phone call from my financial planner about making some changes to my investment portfolio.

During the initial stages of the covid-19 pandemic and lockdown the question of how much is enough became a tough political question.

Who missed out on job seeker or job keeper and why? Why did job seeker increase so much and why is it now decreasing? How will small businesses recover? How many of those who have lost their jobs will remain unemployed for a long time?

In the Saturday Paper last weekend, Yanis Varoufakis, a former Finance Minister in Greece during the Global Finance Crisis, wrote that “the Swiss megabank, UBS, recently reported that, between April and July this year, as the pandemic’s first wave was surging, the collective stash of the world’s billionaires grew by 28 percent and many millionaires joined their ranks.”

In the same newspaper, an overseas student (Ayesha Tiwana) writes of her work situation in 2018 before the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. “After a few weeks I was hired by a café for \$15 an hour [Minimum wage \$19.96]. It was a busy café with a regular customer base who would regularly leave tips in the tip jar. These were never given to the employees, all of whom were international students”. After the lockdown, she became unemployed and survived with a one-off grant from the Victorian government, a rent grant and donations of food from the local community.

While charity helps people like Ayesha and families who struggle to feed themselves after paying their bills, we can have some influence on the political and economic decisions that could either relieve or exacerbate the problems that many face. With that thought in mind, let’s turn to Matthew’s Gospel and today’s reading in particular.

This story of the three men and the talents entrusted to them, is most commonly interpreted as telling us, as Christians, to use wisely what we have been given to grow the kingdom of God. In fact, that tradition has become so entrenched in our thinking that the word ‘talent’ in everyday usage has come to mean a level of competency in some activity, most commonly in the fields of entertainment or the arts.

In fact, the talent was a unit of money equivalent to about 6000 denarii, where a denarius was one day's wage. So, in today's terms, assuming an 8-hour working day at about \$25 an hour, a denarius is equivalent to about \$200. That makes a talent equivalent to \$1 200 000.

So if we read the parable again, one man was given \$12 million, another \$6 million and a third man \$1.2 million. They are told to trade with them. The wealthier two over an unspecified period of time managed to double their money through their trade.

Our present-day billionaires, since 2009 have more than doubled their investments through trading on the stock market, assisted by governments printing money and reducing interest rates to near zero. But back 2000 years ago in Israel, the traders in Jesus story would have been trading in farming property and crops, and probably dealing with the Roman imperialists. When crops failed, small landowners were forced to sell their farms to repay loans to such investors. The investors gained ownership of more and more land, and the former landowners become the day labourers who, if lucky, may have earned a denarius a day.

The third man, with his \$1.2 million, stages a symbolic protest against this abusive exploitation by planting his stash of money in the ground. His action says, "Will your investment grow without exploiting your labourers?" "doesn't your investment depend upon God's productive earth?"

The two successful investors are invited into the master's joy. What is his joy?? Making money! The lone protestor gets what he deserves in a money making world: thrown out of the financial world, into the world of abject poverty, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

To understand this parable, first we need to remember that Jesus confronted the exploitative financial system in both his teaching and his actions, and finished his mortal life executed on a cross, in the darkness of Gethsemane, where there was wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Note, too, that the parable does not commence, as some do, with reference to the kingdom of God, but simply “It is as if”, or “this is how it is”.

We too live in a world where many struggle to feed their families and where the financial systems favour the rich. We have seen during COVID-19 pandemic and the economic downturn that those who are very wealthy become even richer. And the international students, casual workers, asylum seekers lose what little employment they had, and receive no financial assistance from the government. As Jesus says in the parable, “from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away”.

So, living in a consumerist world, how do we find the way, the way of Jesus Christ? It is helpful to read today’s parable in its immediate context. Last week, we heard the parable of the ten bridesmaids urging us to remain faithful, using the image of lamps fueled with oil, to represent possibly our relationships with God. We are encouraged to find and practise ways of experiencing the presence of God.

Next week we will hear the third of these three parables in this chapter. We will hear that when we show love and compassion toward a person in need, it is as if we were serving Christ himself.

I think that when we take these three parables together, we get some clues as to how we find the way in a consumerist society: waiting patiently in God’s presence and learning to love ourselves because of God’s love for each of us; trying to understand and influence the political and economic causes of poverty and injustice; and, as we will hear next Sunday, loving others and showing love through compassionate care for the least among us.

In the Uluru Statement from the Heart, an invitation from our Indigenous brothers and sisters: “We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future”.