

Stewardship

Pentecost 16

There are apparently just three sermon topics that really interest us: Death, Sex and Money. This is a short sermon about the third of these topics.

Stewardship (how we use our time, talents and money) is naturally the concern of most churches, but proper stewardship of all that we have should truly concern each one of us. There are some words in today's Gospel that seem to connect so many of the dots of the Christian message, they are these words of Jesus, 'For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'

Those words are familiar and for most of us visibly true but that does not make them easy to follow. It is perhaps the ultimate contrast between human lives, lives lived for the self and lives lived for another.

What would these two lives look like?

When I lived in Hong Kong one of the wardens there gave me a copy of his favourite book for me to read. He really wanted me to read it. It was *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand. At over 1,000 pages it is quite some read. The book was published in 1957 and has become something of a staple of libertarians in modern times. Its hero is John Galt who lives by a creed, which in time has become known as objectivism. His creed can be summarised by this statement from the book.

'I swear, by my life and my love for it, that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine' (p.670).

We could spend a good amount of time thinking about it, but I just wanted to share with you my personal impression after wading through that 1,000 page of small type. For all his intellect, selfishness, self-knowledge, for all his decisiveness and strength, John Galt is something of a bore. Living for oneself can and most likely will end up that way.

So much for selfishness—you are a prisoner to yourself, and for people without an immense drive and intellect they are stuck in small prisons. The man who is teetering on the edge of alcoholism, who is addicted to AFL and who watches late night TV regularly—can he be describe truly alive (no). All that selfishness does not equate to liveliness or a good life.

Who is the alive person you have met? Who is the most un-alive person you have ever met?

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

I mentioned that this was a sermon about money, and I will get there. But think about money and what we do with it, how we can use it in so many ways, to make ourselves happy, others happy. How we care for it, fret about it, compare ourselves to others by it. How we use money is a pretty good measure of our lives. As Billy Graham once said , ‘A chequebook is a theological document. It tells who and what you worship.’

So what might a life lived not for oneself look like?

Mrs Anne Ferguson is a tall wealthy and very stylish woman whom I once knew in Scotland. Her daughter was a pupil at the school where I was chaplain. She and her husband would come often to Sunday Chapel and so I got to know them. They were part of the wealthy Edinburgh set who sent their children to Scottish boarding schools. But Mrs Ferguson was a tad different, a tad more independent and a tad more aware of the world that actually exists around the very wealthy. She once told me a story which has stayed with me. She had been invited to a bar mitzvah and had been troubled about what to buy this relative of hers. In the end she decided to buy a mountain bike, which struck me at the time as being something of an over generous gift, full of the unknowing-ness of the very wealthy. Parents buy children bikes or grand-parents. But then she said something rather extraordinary. She thought a bike was good so this lad would get off his electronic games, but she felt it was not enough. So she had decided that the boy would give some money to a charity, one that I cannot now remember but one that connected with this boy’s Jewish heritage. She would help him do that by writing the cheque herself. So at the age of 13 he would realize that he was not the centre of his own world, that other people truly mattered and that he should get into a pattern of supporting them. But it was the final thing that really surprised me.

Anne Ferguson said that in the end she got her cheque book out and had written a cheque to the charity. Looking at it, she realized that it had not “hurt her” and ripped up the cheque and wrote one that, in her own words, had hurt her.

But it was clear as she stood in front of me, that the giving had not damaged her, she was happier more alive than most of the other parents. The “her” that she had hurt was the one that might be self obsessed, worried for herself, fiscally shrewd, selfish. The woman in front of me, was anything but that.

She was a woman very much alive.

The idea here is an interesting one. How do we know when we are giving enough? Perhaps we get an idea when we look and think “phew.” How do we know when we are not giving enough. When we simply do not notice it, when our giving is simply a small item on a long lists of other items. If our giving costs us nothing, then are we giving at all.

This is my stewardship sermon for this year. This is the sermon where I am talking very directly about what each of give to support this church. Some have said that we always struggle financially, but my view is that this is a generous church. I have been struck by people’s generosity since I arrived. We need to turn that generosity for individual needs to the mission and running of this church.

It seems to me there are two routes that these sermons can go down.

You can leave here thinking I have preached a “feel bad” sermon, a sermon where I paint how bad this church might become without your giving and about the obligations for each member of this church to support the ministry of the church. If that was the sermon you heard you can head home and sit at your table and think carefully how much you might spare to give to the church; but it is done with something of a heavy heart. The giving hurts alright and every cent hurts and there is no way on earth you will rip up the pledge in order to double it. I hope I have not preached that sermon.

But there is another sermon, one I rather hope that I have preached. One about being truly alive, and what that looks like. If this is the sermon I have preached you go home, and read the stewardship information as you sit at the same table and think. But not with a heavy heart, but freely, being the person you are called to be, freely generous, truly alive. You can sit at that table and think about what you are thankful for, what good you know you and this church have done, and you can pray about what church we can be. If that is the sermon I have preached then your giving is not a burden but a gift and it may hurt, it may take your breath away but you will sit there as thankful as Anne Ferguson?

Amen

Dean John
Bendigo
9th Sept, 2012