

From our Gospel: Jesus said, *'...for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions'* (Luke 12.15b) and a complementary verse from Matthew:

Mt 6.24 Jesus said *No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.*

Back in 1973, with a new collar around my neck as a Deacon in the parish of Toorak Gardens, I was walking down Hindley St on a day off with Andrew King, the then assistant curate at St David's, Burnside who died of leukemia when I was rector of Burnside many years later. Andrew and I were theologs at St Michael's House, Crafers. He was 3 years ahead of me and this was our first meeting as clergy since my graduation. I remember that we walked past a brand new Leyland P76 and I can still recall the slogan 'Anything but average!' It certainly was for us. We remarked on how luxurious the car was compared to Andrew's bomb and my own lack of any wheels at all. That led us to the topic of clergy stipends and conditions. This was in the days when curates had to find their own accommodation, telephone, power and all expenses from their stipends unlike their bosses. Soon we were talking about Sunday Giving. We both agreed that because we had sacrificed bigger pay packets by going into the priesthood rather than being teachers or doctors or lawyers, it was quite reasonable to chuck just a few dollars in the plate, because after all, the church should be supporting *us*. Wrong! Later that night I heard a still small voice beginning with words that St Paul had heard all those centuries before. *My grace is sufficient for you...I did not call you to be a doctor, a lawyer, a butcher, a baker or a candlestick maker. I called you to be a priest. As you strive to be faithful in seeking first my Kingdom in your life and vocation, do also in your giving. I do not want your leftovers: I want all of you.*

Five years later, as priest-in-charge of Kidman Park, I was involved in my first ever Planned Giving Program. Uniting Church Planned Giving ran it and the Director was a man named David Ackland. He was keen on getting the leadership of the parish together to do some teaching and to witness to his own journey in Christian Living and Giving. As he explored both the OT and NT, he spoke of giving not as an obligation, but as an intentional, generous, free-will offering to God

David's witness has stayed with me from that day until now. I thoroughly recommend making the decision as our very first call in our financial dealings, believing that God will honour our decision and that our own needs will be met by what is left. Jesus said *Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven...and all these things will be there as well.* (Mt 6.33) Kingdom values turn all our very human questions upside down. We may need to separate out our needs from our wants and, as conscientious believers, indulge our wants less frequently. I have always admired the saying: *Live simply, that others may simply live.* Can we trust God to supply

our needs? More importantly, can God trust us to be faithful stewards of God's rich bounty to us? There are no rules. Only God's Grace. It is a generous heart and open hand that knows how to give. Such generosity towards others and God's Church, and enthusiasm for Kingdom values will sometimes lead us to give more than we might otherwise, because we have a passion for God's reign in our lives and because God has changed us.

And *Change* is the word. When you take a look at so many of the great people of the Bible and of the Church, like Augustine, John Wesley, Thomas Merton, time and time again you discover big changes in priorities taking place as the call of the Kingdom makes its impact. In most cases big material decisions are made; most of the disciples left everything in an extravagant abandonment to follow Christ. A rich young man was told that he would need to sell all his possessions and give to the poor to apprehend the call of the Kingdom. He couldn't. Zacchaeus, the tax-collector was better off: he gave away only half. John Wesley never spent more than 30 pounds a year on his personal needs, but his income rose to 1400 pounds because of the sale of his books. He continued to live on 30 pounds because that was all his needs required. That doesn't mean that you or I have to. We simply need to respond in our own way to what Jesus meant when he said *You cannot serve God and wealth*. Jesus knew what a huge attraction material possessions are to most people.

In our society money is increasingly enthroned as God. Casinos and Pokie venues are temples of Mammon Worship, Lotto line-ups too. But, just in case you don't gamble, be careful! Shopping Centres can be too. 'Retail Therapy'?! - consumerism more likely. As Christians, we therefore need more than ever before to submit money matters to PRAYER. In his book, *Money, Sex and Power*, Richard Foster says *Money is a spiritual issue and prayer is our chief weapon in the life of the Spirit. Let us learn to pray for each other for the binding of greed and covetousness and the releasing of liberality and generosity. In prayer, through the imagination, let us see the power of money broken. Let us picture the spiritual powers behind money brought under the Lordship of Christ – let us visualize money being channeled into needy lives, providing necessary food and medical supplies. Let us imagine Christians in business controlling, investing, and channeling money in new, creative, life-enhancing ways. Let us see the governments of the world diverting their vast resources from bombs and into bread*

How sad that so much of our nation's political spin and rhetoric is simply about finance or tax. Social, ethical, spiritual and environmental transformation is what our country really needs. Christians are called to lay up treasure in heaven, resources for the Kingdom. Jesus also said "a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." (Luke 6.38)