

Sermon delivered by Rev Ron Nicolson

Sunday 27 September 2009

Goodness! So much we could talk about after those readings, especially after the gospel. I was conducting a training day for Lay Ministers yesterday and asked what they were going to preach about. Only one was going to preach. He said, based on Job and James, he was going to talk about endurance and perseverance. Oh dear, that sounds very worthy and proper. I'm going to talk about money! And I'm going to choose for my text the end of the gospel: "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness what's the use! Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with each other."

Did you see in the news that one of the G20 decisions was to cut back on the salaries and bonuses paid to bankers. And none too soon! The ridiculous bonuses paid to banking executives, paid even those who led their banks recklessly into bankruptcy, were an astounding disgrace. Someone should read the bankers from the epistle of James this morning:

"Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence."

Come to think of it, someone should read it to municipal managers and University Vice Chancellors and Business executives and CEOs. Especially in South Africa, where the gap between the haves and the have nots is perhaps among the sharpest in the world.

I have been thinking that maybe we Christians should declare as a guideline that anyone who accepts a salary of more than R300 000 a year should be declared a thief, tasking money out of the mouths of the poor. "Oh, Come on", the critics will say. "You can't make a law that says that". And no, I don't suppose we could make it law, but we could make it a moral guideline so that those who exceed it feel ashamed of their dirty secret and hide it rather than flaunt it. Perhaps a new King commission on proper governance could declare it unethical for any company or concern to offer a salary higher than that.

"But R300 000", some critics say; "We all earn more than that. We have bonds of R10 000 a month, we have school fees of R80 000 a year, in fact we don't know who we could come out on R300 000". And to be honest I don't know what the limit should be. Maybe R300 000 is too low, though for some of you that would be a handsome sum indeed. But to go up the scale a bit why does anyone need R1m a year. What can one possibly spend it on, that one really needs? Is it not immoral to accept more money than we need.

"But if you don't offer handsome rewards to your top executives you won't get the truly talented people". Oh yes, so we have truly talented municipal managers? And truly talented executives of Athletics South Africa. And truly talented bank executives of Lehman brothers and the Royal Bank of Scotland. Do you remember that Sir Fred Goodwin who drove the Royal Bank of Scotland into bankruptcy was still going to be paid a pension of R160 million.

Pay overfat salaries and I suspect you don't get talent. I suspect you get fat! I suspect you

attract not the talented highflyer but the greedy person who doesn't quite match up to the job. Again, why does anyone need a salary of R1m? Why does Blade Nzimande need a Mercedes that costs around the same? Why can't he manage on a Hyundai Getz? It goes just as fast, its got airbags and ABS braking. Why should cabinet ministers assume they are entitled to cars costing twice, three times as much as an RDP house?

"Again you're being naive", the critics say. "People buy expensive cars because of their resale value, because of generous financing arrangements, because of safety features. They're a good investment." And yes, I know that. That's why I drive, when my wife allows me, a very nice if now rather elderly BMW. At the time we bought it, it was the most economical deal. And yes, let me come clean, there have been brief moments in my life when I have earned more than R300 000 a year.

So I'm not pointing fingers. I'm not really criticizing everyone else. I'm part of the system. I'm criticizing me. We all live in world where we have become used to consumerism and greed for things that we don't really need. I was watching Oprah the other day, with Suzie Ormann the financial guru appearing. On the programme they were bewailing the fact that American school leavers are inundated with letters from banks offering them credit cards. They have no money, they earn no salary, but they are offered a credit card. A credit card with an 18 year old is like a toddler with a hand grenade. Something is likely to go badly wrong. I'm not sure if South African banks do that. I'm not 18 but I do know that I receive endless offers of store cards and credit cards. I do know that in the days when we had domestic helpers who used our postal address they received endless offers of furniture and clothing on credit, and this on a modest domestic workers salary. It seems that our financial systems go all out to make us irresponsible consumers. It seems that everyone encourages us to live at the limit of and beyond our means.

I wonder if perhaps that would not meet the judgement proclaimed by Jesus in today's gospel. "And if anyone causes one these little ones to sin it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone around his neck." I wonder if, with the constant offers of credit they cannot afford, we are not causing poor people, young people, to sin, tempting them to greed? And then around whose neck should the millstone be hung!

So I don't think that the financial crunch is over, green shoots or no green shoots. I think we pay grossly inflated salaries, not only to executives and senior civil servants but to sports stars and entertainment celebrities, while in our own country there are so many living below the poverty line. I do think that is immoral - both those who pay those salaries and those who receive them. I don't think we've learned our lesson. I do think that the whole world has been deceived with a consumerist greed that cannot be sustained. I think that with our advertisements and offers of credit we are training people in greed and irresponsibility. So after the green shoots the markets may crash again.

And so what? I want to come back to the idea of salt. How can we stand, like King Canute, against the incoming tide of greed and consumerism? How can we hope to turn it back. Who will listen? No-one wants Mr Vilakazi to earn R1m a year. But no-one wants to be told that they earn more than they need themselves.

Jesus' point about salt is that you don't need very much. A pinch can change the taste and the attractiveness of a whole meal. But only if the salt can preserve its flavour (I'm not sure, actually,

that salt can lose its flavour. I think it may be a scientific fact that it cannot. But that's beside the point).

Because, of course, Jesus wasn't really talking about salt but about his disciples. Small in number, just a pinch of them, but they can change the whole world. How does salt change the meal? Not by standing aside, not by keeping itself separate, but by being immersed in the stodgy tasteless dish and thus transforming it. How do the disciples change the world? Not by standing aside, not by keeping ourselves separate but by throwing ourselves into the world. BUT we have to preserve our saltiness.

It seems to me that what we Christians are called to do is to create an alternative model of a lifestyle. We are called to live modestly. Not in poverty, not in cruel self-denial; we're not heroic enough for that. But the examine every aspect of our spending and asking, "was that necessary?" Do I need it? or is it just something that I wanted. Do I need as big a house to live in? Maybe I do. Maybe I have lots of children or grandchildren, but ask ourselves. Do I need as luxurious a car to drive? Maybe I do. Maybe I'm old and I need a solid car with automatic transmission, but ask ourselves. Do I need so many pairs of shoes? Do I need membership of a country club that I hardly ever visit? Do I need so often to shop at Woolworths and not at Spar? Do I need fine single malt whisky? Do my children need horse riding lessons and ballet and piano and gym? Do I need gym membership and I never actually go?

But these are little steps. They're not going to change our world! Yes, they will, in time, if we all did them. James says in his epistle today "Be patient. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield up its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains." Actually I think Jesus might have met a better class of farmer. I never met a farmer who waited patiently for rain. But you know what he means. The Lord's coming is near. He will change the world - through ecological and financial disaster if needs be. But he asks us to be part of the process, to be the salt that leavens our greedy consumerist society by immersing ourselves in it by being different, and salty. Not judging, and I'm sorry to have judged Mr. Vilakazi who may well, for all I know, have 15 nieces and nephews and orphan children all of whom he must put through school. I am sorry to have judged Sir Fred although I don't think he has 15 nieces. I am sorry to have judged Mr Nzimande who for all I know has a serious back problem making it impossible for him to ride in anything more modest than a top of the range Mercedes. James says, "Who are you, to judge your neighbour".

But I can judge myself. I can ask myself whether I am living modestly, buying things I need, or greedily, consuming things that I do not need and that do not really add to the quality of my life. I'm not sure I want to do that, and I'm not sure you will either. But Jesus says, "Have salt in yourselves, and then be at peace with each other."