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**Sunday 31 July 2022 to Sunday 7 August 2022**

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Sunday 31 July 2022

# True wealth

by Pauline Simonsen

**Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions (Luke 12:15).**

Read Luke 12:13–21

We look at the rich man in Jesus’ parable and think, ‘Tsk, tsk – such greed!’ But actually, Jesus is simply describing our normal human aspirations in this modern world: work hard, increase your wealth, achieve a comfortable lifestyle and then retire and enjoy yourself! Isn’t that what many of us are doing? Working hard now so that in due course, we hope we’ll have a nice house and the mortgage paid off; the kids all grown up and safely established in their own lives; a decent superannuation fund and enough wealth now to retire and take it easy. Or like the rich man thinks, ‘And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry”’ (Luke 12:19).

Ah. Suddenly Jesus’ parable strikes a bit too close to home. What we took to be his exposure of those rich people out there has become an indictment of our society’s faith in endless acquisition and consumption. And of my personal complicity in that faith. ‘Be on your guard against all kinds of greed’ – including my own personal wealth plan.

But note what Jesus warns about here. He reminds us how precarious our hard-earned wealth and comfort are. ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ All my careful wealth planning, hard work, savings and retirement packages mean nothing to me if I die tomorrow.

Jesus reminds us that ‘life does not consist in an abundance of possessions’ (Luke 12:15). We are much more than our wealth status; our lives are much more than our possessions. If everything I have today is taken away tomorrow, then what is left to me?

How are you answering that question right now? Close your eyes and imagine that.

And now imagine Jesus standing before you, offering to be your Saviour and friend. Hear your Heavenly Father saying, ‘Your wealth matters nothing to me. You are my child, claimed by me in your baptism. I have given you all my riches, dear child’. How will you respond to this?

Jesus finishes his parable with an invitation to be ‘rich toward God’. I wonder what he means by that?

**Father, thank you for all the good things you have given us in our lives, including our wealth and possessions. Help us to realise that you are the giver and the taker, and our true wealth lies in being your child. Show us how to be ‘rich’ towards you. Amen.**

Pauline is a Bible college teacher and spiritual director in Palmerston North, New Zealand. She’s married to Roger – who is recently retired – and she says she enjoys having him home a bit more! When she gets some free time, Pauline loves cooking and reading and likes nothing better than sitting with a cat on her lap and watching the birds in her garden.

Monday 1 August 2022

# Beautiful work

by Pauline Simonsen

**It is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil (Ecclesiastes 3:13).**

Read Ecclesiastes 2:24–26, 3:9–15

Cleaning the toilet – beautiful work? You must be kidding!

As we read today’s verses from Ecclesiastes, we realise that the parable of the rich man in our gospel reading for this week (Luke 12:13ff) is Jesus’ commentary on Ecclesiastes. The rich man in Jesus’ parable worked hard to gather and store wealth, only to hand it over to God and others when he died suddenly. His acquisition and consumption were meaningless, a fruitless chasing after the wind (to quote Ecclesiastes).

In contrast, doing the work God has given us to do in our lives, knowing that because it’s work from God, it is good – beautiful, even – and leads to deep satisfaction and joy. Even if the work is cleaning toilets, tending a teething baby, marking the next student assignment, seeing a difficult client, or turning the tractor for the next furrow … Because God ‘has made everything beautiful in its time’ (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Due to the fall, back in Genesis 3, work became a burden for us. But God redeems that burden through Jesus’ work for us on the cross. Our God-given vocations are beautiful works – even eternal works – because God dignifies them. Because Christ is in us, doing it with us.

And when our work is done each day, we can rest, eat and drink and be glad because this rest, like the good work before it, is all a gift from God.

Working simply to chase wealth – acquiring and accumulating and consuming – this work is exhausting, uncertain and finally empty. It never brings peace. But the good work Jesus calls each of us to, in our different places and vocations, is a source of joy and fulfilment. It’s our offering to God, our bodies being living sacrifices as our act of worship.

And God takes our small, imperfect acts of service – our work – and sanctifies and completes it for us – his power perfected in our weakness. And that work stands forever.

Whatever you do today, let your work be an offering back to the God who gave it to you, who gave you the abilities and time to do it. The God who delights in your offering and in you.

**Lord Jesus, take my work today, whatever it is, and receive it as a sign of my love and gratitude towards you. Fill my work with your perfect power so that it blesses others and honours you. And give me sweet rest at the end of my work today. Thank you, beloved Master.**

Tuesday 2 August 2022

# Gladness of heart

by Pauline Simonsen

**Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless (Ecclesiastes 5:10).**

Read Ecclesiastes 5:10–20

According to the World Inequality Report 2021:

The richest 10% of the global population currently take home 52% of the income. The poorest half of the global population? Well, they earn just 8% ... And, when it comes to wealth (valuable assets and items over and above income) … the poorest half of the global population owns just 2% of the global total, while the richest 10% own 76% of all wealth.¹

And yet Solomon, the writer of Ecclesiastes, laments:

As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owners except to feast their eyes on them? The sleep of a labourer is sweet … but as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep.

I suspect this is Solomon’s personal experience talking.

One of the wealthiest men in the world today lives in loneliness and depression, and his only hope for the future is to escape this dying planet and search for a better life somewhere else in the cosmos. His wealth buys him everything material but can’t buy him stability, joy and peace. ‘What do they gain, since they toil for the wind? All their days they eat in darkness, in great frustration, affliction and anger’ (Ecclesiastes 5:16,17).

The richer get richer, but it does them no good because, finally, we all leave the world as naked and empty-handed as we entered it. What was the purpose of all that toil?

No wonder Solomon says, ‘Meaningless, meaningless – it’s all meaningless!’ (Ecclesiastes 1:1).

At least, it is without God.

When our view is turned not onto our wealth (or poverty) but onto God, the giver of all things, suddenly life has meaning. We know who we are, children of a loving Father. We know we have been redeemed and made new through our Saviour, Jesus. We experience the presence and fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We live in the security of God’s grace and favour, whether we are rich or poor. And with this new perspective, we can even say with Paul:

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength (Philippians 4:12,13).

Solomon says, ‘God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart’.

**Lord, turn our eyes from our material circumstances to you. Give us the gift of contentment with what you have given us and grant us ‘gladness of heart’ as we trust you. Amen.**

¹From the World Economic Forum website https://www.weforum.org/, cited 13/7/22

Wednesday 3 August 2022

# God’s justice

by Pauline Simonsen

**The Lord of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness (Isaiah 5:16).**

Read Isaiah 5:8–17

Judgement comes.

The trajectory of this week’s Bible readings on human greed and grasping leads us inexorably, inevitably, to this outcome. To end the social injustice we humans inflict on each other, God brings his justice.

In Isaiah 5, a fierce, sad Isaiah describes an Israel that reeks of corruption, injustice and debauchery. They are not God’s chosen, holy people – they are ‘rotten’, rejecting and despising the word of ‘the Holy One of Israel’ (Isaiah 5:24).

So Isaiah warns of the judgements that the Holy One of Israel will bring on his beloved people. The property magnates who buy up the small holdings and drive people from the land will find their great mansions desolate and their land producing only a fraction of what it should. The pleasure seekers and the socialites, who spend their lives looking for the next drink and the next party, will die of hunger and thirst. The celebrities and high-status aristocrats will be brought low, just one of the common people, as all are taken as slaves into exile.

Isaiah’s prophecy comes true, as Israel is brought low by the Assyrians and Babylonians.

What of our world? Israel sounds no different to us and our western culture. What is the Holy One’s word to us as we read this?

Like Isaiah, I, too, often despair at this superficial, corrupt and violent world we live in. And I yearn for God to make things right. How I wish that truth, justice and compassion might increase, and God’s righteousness might shine forth instead!

And then I remember – it has! He has! God shines forth, in all his beauty, righteousness, compassion and honesty, in Jesus! The Holy One who is the way, the truth and the life, who went about doing good. He has taken all the injustice and corruption of the world into himself on the cross. He has birthed a new kingdom of justice and mercy in this world.

Final judgement will come upon our culture and all cultures. But in Jesus Christ, we have the righteousness and goodness of God present now. When I am tempted to despair about our world, I remember King Jesus, who reigns already, and whose just kingdom is coming. You and I belong to him. And we carry his kingdom within us to this crooked and perverse generation. Little Christs – shining like stars in a dark world.

**Lord Jesus Christ, we bless you for bringing the righteousness of God to our broken, crooked world. Keep us strong in hope in you, trusting that you will bring true justice and mercy at the right time. Shine your light through us, Lord; make us carriers of your righteousness. We ask in your name. Amen.**

Thursday 4 August 2022

# Desperately seeking …

by Pauline Simonsen

**Do not keep seeking what you are to eat and what you are to drink ... seek [God’s] kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well (Luke 12:29,31).**

Read Luke 12:22–31

Where I live in New Zealand, graceful white arum lilies grow in large clumps in the paddocks – naturalised, common as weeds. I always think of them when I hear Jesus’ famous words, ‘Consider the lilies’ – though the lilies of Israel are no doubt different to my white arums.

Jesus’ point is that they have no value to the farmer – the farmer doesn’t cultivate them, yet the lilies grow abundantly and magnificently in their beauty. God clothes them so for his (and my) pleasure! If he so cares for these ‘worthless’ plants of the field, how much more will he care for us, his treasured children?

Our passage today follows the parable of the rich man, the gospel for this week. Here Jesus goes to the deep heart-reason for human acquisition and greed: our insecurity, our fear. We toil and accumulate to create a security buffer against adversity and poverty – even perhaps against our own insufficient identity. If this striving is our only answer to the frailty and precariousness of human life, no wonder we worry all the time! Will we ever have enough? What if a recession comes? What if I lose my job? How will we live?

And so we strive – and keep striving – for enough, for more … desperately seeking security.

Earlier, Jesus comments, ‘life does not consist in an abundance of possessions’ (Luke 12:15). Now he repeats again: ‘life is more than food, and the body more than clothes’. Material security does not create a full, abundant life. All our readings for this week have proven that.

Only one person can give us what we desperately seek. Jesus declares:

I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they [you!] may have life, and have it to the full (John 10:9,10).

Our Heavenly Father knows what we need – we don’t need to strive for it. Instead, Jesus urges us to use our energies seeking him and his lordship in our lives! That way lies life – for you, the people you love and this world!

Thank God, our good shepherd Jesus comes and finds us, drawing us into his pasture. He fills us with his life and peace. That’s real security.

**Loving God, I worry way too much. Draw me back to yourself, and remind my soul of your love, grace and provision of all I need. Keep me in perfect peace by fixing my mind on you, today and always. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.**

Friday 5 August 2022

# Leading God’s church

by Pauline Simonsen

**Those who serve well … gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 3:13).**

Read 1 Timothy 3:1–13

Who would be a bishop?!

Paul’s job specification in 1 Timothy for the role of overseer, or bishop, is a daunting prospect. I wonder how anyone agrees to serve in the role!

It makes me incredibly grateful for the people who have said yes over the years – whom God has raised to oversee our church. They are God’s gifts to us, and he has graced each with the wisdom and ability to lead our Lutheran Church.

Will you join me in thanking God for our leaders, past and present? And in praying for them regularly, as they seek to be Godly shepherds of his church? They would be the first to say how much they need our prayers.

In these verses directed to the young church leader Timothy, Paul speaks of both overseers (bishops) and deacons (servers). Both clergy and lay people, in fact. Both were set aside in the early church to minister to the people of God in different ways. Paul has serious job specs for the deacons and deaconesses, too. All of us who have any leadership role in Jesus’ church can read these verses often and pray for God’s grace and help to be the leaders he calls us to be.

Note that Paul specifically mentions Christian leaders’ relationship to money: they must not be ‘greedy for money’. Being in leadership does not make us immune to the anxieties of insecurity and the temptations of greed we have been reading about this week. Indeed, the love of money is a favourite way Satan undermines leaders of God’s church. Let’s pray protection over them, whatever denomination they are in.

There’s a wonderful promise for us all at the end of Paul’s words in these verses. ‘For those who serve well as deacons [and bishops!] gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.’ As we serve faithfully in Jesus’ church in the power of the Holy Spirit, ministering to each other and to the world, God grows us in boldness in our faith. We become more ready and able to speak our faith, to live it out, to be the leaders God wants us to be. We grow into our job specs!

**Thank you, Lord God, for the leaders you have given to your church over the years, especially for our own bishops and lay leaders. We pray for them now, asking you to protect them and give them all they need to fulfil their calling as our leaders. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Saturday 6 August 2022

# Our hope is in God

by Pauline Simonsen

**We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield (Psalm 33:20).**

Read Psalm 33:12–22

What are you putting your hope in?

Maybe it’s in your strength, health and ability to work and keep going, even through tough times. It could be in your intelligence, mental abilities, skills or talents. It could be in your bank balance, share portfolio and pension plan. Maybe it’s in your spouse and family and the loved ones around you. Or perhaps it’s in the fact that you live in a relatively stable, prosperous and fair country.

They say that if you want to know what your idol is – where you are looking for security and what you’re putting your hope and trust in – imagine each of these things mentioned above being taken away from you. And then note how you feel and respond to that prospect!

The psalmist tells Israel that it’s a waste of time to put their hope in the great strength of their army. Israel’s great hope is not their king or their military might – Israel’s hope is their God, the Lord! How blessed they are that he chose them as his people! ‘The eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those who hope in his unfailing love.’ The Lord God looks from the transcendence of heaven and sees us all, knows our very hearts – and sees where each of us puts our hope. And for those who put their hope in him – well, they will experience his love, help and deliverance.

This isn’t wishful thinking or poetic hyperbole. We who know the Lord have already seen his deliverance: we have received his love and help in the person of Jesus, the Son. He has rescued us from the mire of sin and set our feet upon the rock of his faithfulness; he has brought us wholeness and peace instead of our brokenness and misery.

The unfailing love of God is with us – Immanuel, no less. So why would you put your hope for your life, for your future, anywhere else?

**Oh, how blessed are we to have you as our God and King, loving Lord! Our hearts rejoice because we belong to you, and you fulfil all our hopes! Keep us steadfast in our hope, and keep our eyes fixed on you – even as you hold us eternally in your loving gaze. Amen.**

Sunday 7 August 2022

# Being prepared for an unknown deadline

by Pastor Steve Liersch

**It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. He will dress himself to serve, make them recline at the table and wait on them (Luke 12:37).**

Read Luke 12:32–40

Recently, my wife and I went away with friends for the weekend, sharing our return time with one of our children still at home. We had discussed coming home on Monday evening, but around 2.00pm on Sunday, we received a call ‘just checking’ to see if it was Sunday or Monday we were returning as a small number of tasks hadn’t yet been completed. For example, bringing in the washing and vacuuming the floors.

Mild panic can set in when we know we haven’t achieved all that must be done by a given deadline. Distractions abound these days – especially social media time lost, not to mention TV, friends and hobbies, along with the busyness of life. Sometimes the essentials of life can be left to the last minute, and for some, this can also include giving appropriate attention to spiritual and eternal needs.

When Jesus reminds his disciples and us that we must be ready for his return, being watchful, dressed and expectant, he is forewarning us (and the world for that matter) that he will return. He wants to find us ready and waiting for the blessings he has in store for us eternally. Only God knows when that ‘deadline’ will eventuate, and so these words help prepare us to be recipients of his grace.

There’s also something wonderful in the image of Jesus dressed to serve us in heaven, blessing us with his heavenly banquet at the table he has prepared for us.

How well prepared are you to meet Jesus should this life’s deadline come tomorrow?

**Heavenly Father, thank you for your willingness to give us a place in your kingdom. Help me treasure what this world can’t provide, namely your Son Jesus as our Lord, Saviour and Servant King. Prepare my life with your Spirit and word every day. Amen.**