

# Treasure Beyond Bankruptcy?

## An economy of hope in time of fear

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 7 August 2022

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Pentecost 9C

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16; Luke 12: 32-40

The video of this reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

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Today's reading from Luke begins with the often-repeated phrase '*don't be afraid*'. It is a phrase so often repeated that it has given me pause for thought this week. Do the Scriptures encourage us all the time not to be afraid, precisely because the people for whom they were written were in fact constantly afraid? They would have had good reason to be. As far as we can tell most early followers of Jesus were subject peoples living in occupied territory.

The might of Rome was a constant threat, taxes were high, financial insecurity inevitable, and it was not as though they had the securities of modern medicine, analgesics, and antibiotics. Moreover, the expectation of Christ's imminent return, coupled with an increasing impatience at its delay sounds an anxious apocalyptic note throughout the pages of the New Testament.

But what about ourselves? Are we also afraid? Religion has, after all, for centuries traded in fear – fear of God's punishment and condemnation, sweetened by the promise of salvation for those who truly believe, (some have called that 'pie in the sky when you die'); treasures in heaven beyond the reach of moth, rust, and thieves – and after the last few months in Sydney I'd want to add mould!

So, are we also afraid? This is an important question as we enter a period of considering our mission as a congregation. If we are afraid, what are we afraid of? – remembering that fear is not all bad. It is a great motivator to action. But the encouragement of the gospel is not to be afraid, but to act from a different place – a place where we don't have supposed 'treasures' to defend; a place where we are set free from the need to control and secure; a place indeed as the letter to the Hebrews calls it, of faith.

In the world at large there is plenty to fear – ecological degradation, war, rising prices, COVID, and the general destabilisation of political patterns that have been in place for a while. In Australia, if the recent census is to be believed, this is not resulting in a return to religion for answers or community. Rather, churches across the board are recording a yet steeper decline. Churches then become fearful too, anxiously seeking ways to shore up their own existence and usefulness, and engaging in – well, mission planning processes! Processes that if we are not very careful can give us an illusion of control when what is needed is release.

Let's think some more about 'treasure', for as the text says, '*where your treasure is there your heart will be also*'. The implication is of course that we should put our faith not in tangible things like money or buildings that perish, but in God.

Yet there are also many intangible things to which we can become inordinately attached, and these too can distract us from the greater mission, the *missio dei*, the mission of God. Let's suppose that a fire broke out in Pitt St here this morning – it's all right I'm sure everything's been checked and tagged, and no-one's left the gas on! – but let's suppose we all needed to get out quickly. What would be our first priority?

If we were a more catholic church, I'm pretty sure the priest would rush at once to scoop up the reserved sacrament! But here I would expect that we would see one another as the body of Christ, and I would hope that we would all try to help one another, taking care of the most frail and vulnerable first and seeking to preserve human life as our first concern. Our community is our greatest treasure, and it would only be at a later point that we might seek to save items of furniture or even the building itself.

For the community of people is itself the most important repository of other less tangible treasures – our story, our theological self-understanding, our ways of interpreting the world – we could say our 'culture'. Tangible objects can help, but the people and the values they hold within them matter most.

However not all that we hold within us has lasting value. Beliefs and practices that we have held for decades sometimes need to be let go, as we recognise that we have outgrown them or that they were simply not a great idea in the first place. Why do we cling to such things?

Often it has to do with fear – fear of letting go something that has helped us feel safe; fear of how we might then appear to others if reputation or respectability has been prioritised for us in childhood; fear of the emptiness that can come when we let go a treasured assumption and of what might take its place. But the gospel says '*don't be afraid*' – don't be afraid, with kind and self-compassionate eyes, to take out our most treasured inner assumptions and release them into the greater light of God. For beyond the letting go, new riches are to be found. Be ready – dressed for action and lamps lit as Luke describes it– for a new adventure, to set out once again in faith, not knowing where the road will take us.

For it seems that some of the church's 'treasures' – theological, moral, and spiritual – are no longer adequate to the questioning of our society. Some indeed in recent decades have declared the churches to be morally bankrupt, especially in the light of instances of child sexual abuse and the worst excesses of so-called conversion therapy. We could also declare a theological bankruptcy in our seeming inability to engage at depth with issues of science and philosophy and a spiritual bankruptcy in our failure to meet the yearning of our day for practices that nourish from the deep waters of our own Christian traditions and some tendencies to offer only a deadening dogma.

So maybe, in fact, a declaration of bankruptcy would serve us well!

The Australian government's website about bankruptcy suggests that '*bankruptcy can release you from most debts, provide relief and allow for a fresh start*'. There are some downsides, including sale of assets, and prohibition on travel outside of Australia for a period for example, but overall, it offers real benefit to those prepared – or perhaps obliged- to take that path.

I once saved my father from bankruptcy. I was quite young with some small but sufficient savings. His business was in trouble, and it seemed the obvious thing to do. But looking back I wonder if it really helped. It might have been better to have started again. A greater collapse might have left more space for the new to grow.

And perhaps as churches this is the humility to which we are now invited that will open us to possibilities of unknown treasures beyond bankruptcy and seeming collapse. Accepting that invitation asks of us courage and a different kind of hope.

The American philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear explores the ethical questions raised by the possibility of the collapse of cultures, writing:

*'ruin is a possibility we all must live with – even when our culture is robust ...it is a possibility that marks us as human.'* In the face of this we are called to courage and to a radical hope that *'anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it'* requiring a *'daunting form of commitment: to a goodness in the world that transcends one's current ability to grasp what it is'*.<sup>i</sup>

Or as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews expressed it, this requires faith, in the sense of *'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'*

So, we are being invited to assess our 'treasures' – material, moral, theological, spiritual – with great kindness, but also with a true willingness to let all of them go.

*'There is a place'*, writes Iris Murdoch *'for a sort of contemplation of the Good ...which is not just the planning of particular good actions but an attempt to look right away from the self towards a distant transcendent perfection....a kind of undogmatic prayer which is real and important'*.<sup>ii</sup>

It is from such a place of faith in what lies beyond our immediate capacity to understand that fresh insight springs.

The practical implications of such a stance remain to be seen. But if we allow ourselves without fear to contemplate a future in which many of our current institutional trappings are let go, endless possibilities emerge. If for example the Uniting Church in Australia was to follow its commitment to First Nations people through to its logical conclusion, then many, if not all, our church buildings and the lands on which they stand would be handed over to local Land Councils.

If, here at Pitt St, we found ourselves unable or not quite willing to go so far, we might nevertheless put our assets of property and human resource at the disposal of Aboriginal people in radical ways and find the shape of church life transformed in ways we cannot yet imagine. And if we have no idea how to do that then we are starting from a good place – a place of what Jesus called *'poverty of spirit'*; a place where we must ask and not tell, coming as suppliant not ruler.

Or, to move from the realm of the highly material and practical, to the more intangible and spiritual, if we were (and I really don't think this likely, or even desirable), but as a challenge to our fundamental assumptions – if we were to let go of our long-held attachment to the primacy of words in liturgy and enter into an intentional practice of silence, what might be the impact of that?

In that voluntary release, we might find ourselves encountering the *'immense silence, the great quiet'* of the ancient Christian monastic tradition – a place that challenges our chattering need to shape and control. And in that place, we might find unexpected and radical hope.

What kind of hope? Well, I'm not quite sure – for if I knew it would not be a matter of faith. But it is the kind of hope to which our forebears, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Mary and all the rest bore witness – the hope for a better and as yet unimaginable future of liberation and renewal.

So, as we begin this process of sifting through our treasures and seeking the future for our small part of God's creation, let us have the courage to face our own bankruptcy and the imagination to let go anything that might impede the breaking in of an unimaginably abundant love.

Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Jonathan Lear *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* Harvard University Press 2008

<sup>ii</sup> Iris Murdoch *The Sovereignty of Good*