

# Barns, the 'Market' & the Kingdom

a sermon preached on the

## 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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at

**St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**

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Lections: Luke 12:13-21

It's been a big week on the money and share markets. On the 28<sup>th</sup> July, after share market 'jitters', *The Australian's* finance pages reassured investors this way: "The fundamentals of global economic growth are forecast to shield the financial markets against the start of a worldwide equities correction, despite a global sharemarket lurch yesterday."<sup>1</sup>

Last Thursday the *NZ Herald* summed up this week's US 'sub-prime mortgage' collapse and its consequences: "The worldwide stock market slump has increased the chance of a recession in New Zealand, local fund managers warned yesterday as the meltdown of another US mortgage company wiped almost \$700 million off the NZX. The NZX-50 had its fourth consecutive day of heavy losses. It shed 1.3 per cent of its value, taking its overall slump to almost 4 per cent - or \$2.1 billion - since Thursday's close. AMP Capital Investors head of equities Guy Elliffe said US problems were being felt on the local market for several reasons. The first was that stocks were becoming more risky than their returns justified as the market became more volatile. 'In other words, the returns investors are expecting are widening. People are wanting to get paid for risk, and that causes all equity and bond assets to have a downward adjustment in price. Secondly, you'd have to say the probability of a US recession has increased and, if so, then the probability of a New Zealand recession has increased slightly too and that's affecting asset prices.' Elliffe said that in any market correction, 'you've got to look at the level of excess in the underlying market'."<sup>2</sup>

By Friday *The Herald* was saying: "The economy is well placed to weather the potential fallout from the problems in the US housing market that have sent world equity markets and the New Zealand dollar tumbling in recent days."<sup>3</sup>

Are you following all this? It's astounding that every day our newspapers and televisions produce this bizarre language which is pure gobble-de-gook to the vast majority of us! If a theologian uses a word like Christology, eschatology or salvation people call that esoteric technical language – 'Why won't he speak just like the rest of us!' Never mind the Athanasian creed's description of the Holy Trinity as "the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the Holy Spirit incomprehensible"<sup>4</sup>, what about the torrent of gibberish with which economists massage us into numbed incomprehension day after day!

What this betrays is that the language of economics is highly coded, a high priestly jargon for the high priests of what we call 'the market', and that this market and its language have become so firmly embedded into our global ideology that it is thoroughly normalised. Could it be that this coded jargon is also a polite and quasi-scientific cover-up of greed, injustice and systemic poverty? It is 'normal' for the vast majority of the population to not be able to understand this high priestly code. So much so that even when \$2.1 billion is shaved off the value of stocks in a week we hardly blink! And the corollary to this is that most of us are content this way. In much the same way that in the medieval religious structure the lay people were, with few exceptions, content to leave the mysteries of the system to the clerical class, so the vast majority of us 21<sup>st</sup> century consumers are content to entrust the mysteries of the even more mysterious and all-compelling 'market' system to today's high priests – economists. The market is an article of unchallengeable doctrine in our time, every bit as infallible as a papal statement – no, much more so!

Similarly, it was an unchallengeable article of doctrine in the Ancient Near East that family inheritances should be divided, according to a complex set of rules and customs, in which the Rabbi, not the economist, was the interpreter of the code. By resisting the man's request Jesus refuses to take the role prescribed for him according to the articles of legal doctrine. Instead, he tells a parable, which is more than clear enough for the man to understand. Indeed, in spite of the fact that our economic systems have evolved, even so, Jesus' parable continues to speak with a razor-sharp directness to our market economy. We have no difficulty

<sup>1</sup> Lisa Macnamara & Scott Murdoch, *The Australian*, [http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,22146419-643,00.html?from=public\\_rss](http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,22146419-643,00.html?from=public_rss)

<sup>2</sup> NZ Herald, Thursday 2 August 2007, [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/3/story.cfm?c\\_id=3&objectid=10455282](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/3/story.cfm?c_id=3&objectid=10455282)

<sup>3</sup> NZ Herald, Friday 3 August 2007, [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/category/story.cfm?c\\_id=34&objectid=10455539](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/category/story.cfm?c_id=34&objectid=10455539)

<sup>4</sup> Athanasian Creed, *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Alexandria: Broughton Books, 1995, p487.

translating stocks, equities, shares, bonds, property portfolio and so on for his 'larger barns'. It hardly needs explanation, then or now. "This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"<sup>5</sup>

Yet this very clear teaching remains perhaps the most neglected part of Christian evangelism and mission. Christians are best known for banging on about sex and other matters of private morality but completely disregard this teaching. Christians also spend ever-increasing amounts of money and energy protecting buildings and other property and financial assets and ignore this teaching. None of us is immune. This parish's annual budget depends upon the 'investment performance' in the share market of an endowment left to us – and for Vestry, as with every other investor, the unchallengeable doctrine of the market is virtually impossible to resist. Indeed, for all of us retirement life is shaped - as the introduction of Kiwi Saver graphically illustrates - by the same articles of bigger-barns economics-religion.

Jesus' teaching remains much too hard, just as it was for the wealthy young man who enquired about eternal life but who, addicted to his possessions, went away sad.<sup>6</sup> For we are all 'market' people, whether we are conscious of that or not. The market is as 'natural' to us as the air we breathe and the water we drink. And the market offers us many goodies to which we are thoroughly addicted. None of us expects to pay more for air fares. None of us wants to give up our cheap computers, electronic gadgets, jeans, and all those other things manufactured in places where people are paid considerably less for their time than we are. We cannot imagine a life not governed by the 'market'. In the same way that the man who wanted Jesus to issue a rabbi's verdict could not imagine a life not governed by the codes of inheritance.

Now in spite of the twenty centuries between us, and all the modern sophistication of our 'market', what we share in common is the fundamental article of economics-religion upon which both are founded. A text book on the subject of economics describes one of its basic themes this way: "Virtually all resources are *scarce*, meaning that humanity has less of them than we would like. So choices must be made among a *limited* set of possibilities... one popular definition of economics is that it is a study of how best to use limited means in the pursuit of unlimited ends."<sup>7</sup> This is the common denominator for the Ancient Near East and our so-called 'free market' – scarcity, which generates a fear of missing out, a scramble for unlimited ends, and bigger and more expensive security systems to hedge against possible scarcity. One only has to observe the most ordinary activities, such as a crowd lining up for a bus or train, to see how this fundamental article of economics-religion pervades our way of life. Our entire economics depends on scarcity and fear of missing out.

But Jesus does not share our doctrine. Rabbi Jesus rejects our fundamental articles of economics-religion. I said last Sunday, 'show me a person's prayer, and I'll tell you what their god is like.' The god of the market is a god of scarcity and preferential treatment for the hard-working, the wise, and the inheritors of family wealth. But the God to whom Jesus prays, Abba, Father, is the God of a Kingdom. "Your Kingdom come!" he prays.<sup>8</sup> Have we yet understood what we pray for when we join with Christ in his prayer? The **εὐαγγέλιον** *evangelion*, the good news, is that God's Kingdom is the complete reversal of our scarcity and fear. God's economics, God's economy, God's breaking open of the tomb of the world in Christ, is the economy of liberating Love, joy and hope, an economy of abundance. And the only 'gospel' worthy of that title in our fear-ridden, market-fixated, scarcity-gripped world is the gospel of the topsy-turvy Kingdom of abundant life. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."<sup>9</sup>

We are given a foretaste of the treasures of this Kingdom at every eucharist, at the great marriage feast of the Lamb, in the broken Body and the Blood poured out. At the Eucharistic feast there is more than enough for all - no scarcity, no need for fear of missing out, no need for bigger barns. Eucharist is the overturning of the market economics tables and its high-priestly doctrine. At the Eucharistic feast every one of God's children – regardless of position in family, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, language, intelligence, colour, or any other distinction – is infinitely-precious, equally-valued, every one a soul coming alive through the deathless Love of the tomb-shattering Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. And the mission of the church, and of every baptised person, is to live a eucharistically-shaped life.

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 12:20

<sup>6</sup> Luke 18:18-23 & parallels

<sup>7</sup> Baumol W J, Blinder A S, *Economics: Principles and Policy* 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988, p35.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 11:2

<sup>9</sup> John 10:10