

103. Two Reflections on Bible and Economy

This was first given as part of morning-devotions by Bob Goudzwaard when the WCC Department of Justice, Peace and Creation met in Geneva to prepare for encounters with IMF and World Bank in 2002.

See also: www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/survey/2003/031703.pdf

Bible and money: Luke 16:9-15

In this chapter of Luke we find the remarkable parable of Jesus about the unjust *oikonomos* or steward (verses 1- 8). But as a kind of attachment to this story, Jesus also adds some important congruent remarks about the role and significance of money. In these words there is something highlighted which enables us to focus upon the 'monetary aspect' of human society. But before we explore that let us first consider, as carefully as possible, each of Jesus' separate statements. No less than six 'components' of his view can be distinguished here.

1. **money can fail.** The reference for this can be found in v9: "*And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations*" (KJV translation). This text forms the conclusion of the parable which has just been told by Jesus. This is a parable which speaks of a 'wasteful or 'squandering' steward who is asked by his master to produce his corrupt accounts. But then, with a refreshing kind of economic calculus, this steward then asks his master's debtors to come in and offers them a partial relief from their debts. The *oikonomos* is able to do so because he eliminates only that part of the debt, which according to the practise of those days, stood for the accumulated surplus of non-paid yearly interest. This sum was often already added to the initial loan from the beginning. Thus by his action the debtors are thus 'set free' from the obligation to pay that hidden sum of accumulated interest, which according to the *Thora* should indeed never have been required of them at all (see Leviticus 25:36). And so the story implies that this master could indeed not take any legal action against his incompetent but extremely shrewd housekeeper. And so he has to concede his 'astuteness' (v 8).

It is very interesting that in this parable we are presented with two different styles, or paradigms, of economic thinking and acting and they are opposed to each other. The first is the usual style, which starts from the need to preserve and grow the existing capital and thus a need to enforce all the financial obligations upon debtors. This includes the payment of the full amount of interest according to the never-ending law of usufruct and profit-making. But the fraudulent steward is, as it were, compelled to think differently. For he is standing on the brink of being made redundant, of being excluded from all the benefits of this monetary 'realm' and in any case his time in this domain is

now coming to an end. And so his perspective broadens. He begins to think in terms of the benefits, which in the future can accrue to himself from a completely different type of 'investment': the investment in new friendships. He begins to think and to act via the good things - like hospitality - which previous debtors can and will possibly voluntarily offer to him at the moment that 'mammon fails'.

It is indeed another paradigm. Obviously it makes a real difference for our way of acting and thinking if we see the rule of money as a never-ending safe domain or, as a domain which at a certain moment may fail to offer us life and protection. Only in this latter view, which of course is more 'realistic' than the former, does this new type of economic calculus get its chance.

2. money belongs to the small things. The reference here is to v10: "*The man who can be trusted in little things can be trusted also in great...*" (NEB). The two different styles of economic thinking come to the fore once more. If money and the possession of goods are seen as the final and trustworthy compass in your life, then they indeed become of central importance as 'the' way to reach personal satisfaction and happiness. But Jesus explicitly rejects this position. For his basic category is not (personal) possession but (mutual) trust. From the viewpoint of trust, which includes being trusted by God and by your fellowmen, you should of course also be trustworthy in financial matters. But this type of trustworthiness is, at the same time, one of the lightest tasks to fulfil, or one of the smallest burdens which one can imagine. To say it in other words, the monetary side of the economy is, from the viewpoint of a trustworthy society, no more than an economy of the 'little things'. It rests on the base of far greater and more important things: mutual trust and help.

In a somewhat similar way Jacques Derrida writes about the significance of the 'an-economic' which precedes 'the economic'. It leads him, for instance, to honour the *true gift*, because the gift '*escapes the closed circle of checks and balances, the calculus which accounts for everything, in which every equation is balanced*' (See John D Caputo The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida 1997: 160).

3. money has no part in real wealth. The reference here is v 11: *If then, you have not proved trustworthy with the wealth of this world, who will trust you with the wealth that is real?* This seems just a repetition of what has been said before, but it is not. The words '*wealth of this world*' enter, and with them the obvious awareness that there exists not only two ways, but also two worlds of economic living and acting. The '*wealth of this world*' consists primarily of what you and others possess. But this virtual wealth is not equal to real wealth. While people of 'this' world are inclined to look at their financial properties as real, and place faith and trust in God at the same time in the imaginary realm, Jesus here, as it were, turns these two around: it is the wealth of this world which is imaginary. And Jesus does so by also looking to

the way in which you 'get' your wealth. For while the first 'virtual' type of wealth is obviously something which you have earned for yourself or for which you perhaps had to fight to acquire it, the second type of wealth, the real one, is given or entrusted to you by God and by the community. It is, so to say, a kind of endowment. Real wealth is life-giving and community-supported wealth, and so finds its origin not in conquest but in receipt. His wealth does not give him life, as Jesus had said somewhat earlier about the rich man and his enormous properties (v12,16).

4. money intervenes in human relationships. The reference for that can be found in v 12: "*And if you have proved untrustworthy with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?*" Here the other, the neighbour, comes fully into sight, he is even mentioned first. And the formulation which Jesus chooses here is strong: it is obviously only via the Other - or as Levinas would say: via the Face of the Other - that we can see ourselves and our 'own' economy in the true light. The steward in the parable seems to deal only with bills, debts and money. But in fact he is primarily dealing with the Otherness of the debtors, and with all of what belonged to them. For he, as steward, had initially infringed badly in their lives before his own corruption was detected, but then he began to deal with their lives in a healing way when he started to respect their (small) 'belongings'. In both phases, the bad one and the good one, money was thus active as a vehicle of intervention in living human relationships. It is, by the way, somewhat noteworthy that any reference to the property of the master as their creditor is missing from the text; that is clearly of lesser importance.

To conclude: money is never seen by Jesus as merely an 'I-it relationship' (in the sense of Martin Buber). For him, money always functions in a human context; not only in the context of 'I-you' relationships, but also of 'You- I' relationships. The dignity of the Other is for him clearly the real frame of reference.

5 money can enslave. This refers to v 13: *No servant can be the slave of two masters .. You cannot serve God and Money* (again NEB). This is a very remarkable text, because it places every person, every man, in the servant's position. And that while the usual way of relating to money is always in terms of being its master! Already Adam Smith spoke of money in terms of the power to command goods, and Milton Friedman related money used in a market-economy primarily to the 'freedom to choose'. In the words of Jesus, human 'servanthood' of one type or another is however inescapable. There is a servanthood which sets you free and affirms you to serve God and your neighbour, and that servanthood turns money into a little thing. But outside that realm of God, money sooner or later gets the control over human lives and as a imposing power begins to set the rules. It gives its users the impression that they have the power to command or control, but the more they come to trust it, the easier they are deprived of their real freedom and

dignity.

The usual dichotomy in economics and economic policy is that between freedom and control. But here we learn that the dichotomy between real freedom and enslavement may be more important. For money has the inbuilt power to enslave.

6 the love for money has its root in self-affirmation. This refers to verses 14-15: *“The Pharisees who loved money heard all this and scoffed at him. He said to them: You are the people who impress your fellow-men with your righteousness; but God sees through you; for what sets itself up to be admired by men is detestable in the sight of God.”* Here Jesus pushes the discussion to the depths in his explanation of what may tempt even very pious people to serve money above God. It is the will to impress, to be admired by others, which are the unmistakable signs of the drive towards self-affirmation. Self-affirmation may even choose the veil of righteousness to reach its detestable goal: the glorification of oneself in the eyes of the other. 'The other' becomes, as it were, the instrument, the object in the set-up which seeks to achieve more admiration. It is a desire which is evidently present, also in the world of money of today.

Let us now try to make the effort to look to the coherence which binds these six elements and turns them into an unified perspective. First, just by naming them again:

- money can fail,
- belongs to the small things,
- has no part in real wealth,
- intervenes in human relationships,
- can enslave, and
- has its root in self-affirmation,

something like an underlying central view becomes visible. Money may look to us like a simple facilitating device for human economic interaction, but for Jesus its primary characteristic is obviously its empire- building quality or potential. It is an empire which grows and expands primarily in the human heart, but which, if it becomes fully grown, comes out and reveals itself in all of its features as a kind of anti- Kingdom; a public rule or domain which rejects the very basics or essentials of God's own Kingdom. For then it begins - let us just follow the six elements - to suggest to the human mind its own type of endlessness; the *idee-fixe* of an infinite autonomous domain for which no alternative exists. Money within that realm is changing from a modest

means into an important ends, the goal for life. For that happens as soon as its powerful suggestions are accepted and believed that real wealth and happiness can be reached by following its acquisitive pathway. But it is at the same time a path which legitimates all types of selfish intervention in the life of others; they are not treated from the viewpoint of their dignity, but from the perspective of self-affirmation. But so also the human self is gradually removed from its true 'identity'. The human subject ends as a slave who obediently follows all the rules of a never-ending accumulation of money or capital.

Two things strike us here and form our conclusion.

The first is, that if this interpretation of the text is correct, Jesus does not condemn the role or use of money as such. He even recommends a specific kind of money-use, namely that type of use by which friendship is made possible and is even effective after the collapse of the domain of money: as well in this life, as in relation to '*the eternal dwellings*'. But at the same time, Jesus makes crystal clear that money, because of its enormous potential to seduce people and nations, can also take the lead in the creation of an overmastering empire: the Kingdom of Mammon. It is a kingdom or empire which functions in all its traits as a kind of opposite to the Kingdom of God: in its view of life, in its view of the other, in its view of the self, of wealth, of righteousness, of liberty, and of the reality of nature. So that there is indeed no 'freedom to choose' for both: you can never be a loyal citizen of both kingdoms.

But there is also a second thing to note. If we look to present modern societies, then it is almost shocking to see in how many respects the signs are present and the evidence confirms what Jesus saw as traits of the Kingdom of Mammon. If we look at the degree of self-affirmation, to the enormous role of money and capital, to the unending desire for power, to the compass-directing role that is ascribed to money and finance, and last but not least the harsh way of dealing with weak debtors, then this Kingdom seems now to be the victorious one. And this is also the case where nations of a so-called Christian origin are pre-eminent in these tendencies. In the present processes of globalization we can observe similar trends. Of course there is no need to condemn globalization as such; in that respect it is similar to money. But, on the other hand, it would be just crazy to deny that the Empire of 'Mammon' - a term which comes from Nicholai Berdjew - has already gained some strong footholds in this entire globalization process. It has permeated the style of thinking and acting of even highly respected international Institutions and because of its lack of respect for the poor and for nature now casts deep shadows over the future of the whole world.

Let us therefore hope, work and pray that the churches of the *oecumene* will increasingly become more aware of the dangers of worldwide enslavement and destruction because of Mammonism which even rules to some extent in their

own midst. Let them re-affirm in these days their deepest loyalties to another kingdom: the Kingdom of God. For that is a Kingdom in which we are invited to create new friendships with the victims, even at a moment when the fruits of our own fraud and corruption have become plain for all to see.

2. Bible and market-prices: Matthew 27

Market-prices are running through the Gospels. 'Are not sparrows five for twopence?' Jesus asks his disciples (Luke 12:6). And when Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anoints Jesus with perfume, Judas asks: 'Why was this perfume not sold for thirty pounds?' (John 15:5). But perhaps the most intriguing reference to prices we find in the midst of the story of the passion of Jesus, Matthew 27:3

When Judas his betrayer saw that Jesus was condemned, he brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying: "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood". But they said: "What is that us? See to that yourself" ... Taking up the money, the chief priests argued: "This cannot be put in the temple fund, it is blood money". So, they used it to buy the Potter's field, as a burial place for foreigners. And in this way fulfilment was given to the prophetic utterance of Jeremiah: "they took the thirty silver pieces, the price set on a man's head, and gave the money for the potter's field."

Why is it intriguing? It is not only because three totally different economic goods or services bear here the same price. The thirty shekels by which Judas was paid, was less than half of the value of the perfume which was about 75 shekels. Judas was paid lower than this for his angry-stand, for the 'service' he rendered by betraying somebody. Secondly, the thirty shekels stands for the price of a piece of land (the potter's field). But, thirdly they also stand for nothing less than the price of a life, of a human life.

We find in the Old Testament the background of this last economic 'valuation': Exodus 21:32, for instance, reads: "If an ox gores a slave or a slave-girl, its owner shall pay thirty shekels of silver to their master, and the ox shall be stoned".

Thirty shekels is thus nothing more and nothing less than the price of a slave, and that brings us to a deeper intriguing level. It is as if in this whole passage, which is placed in the midst of the story of Jesus' sufferings, there is not only a coincidence of prices, but also a convergence of perversions - and in casu perversions of the economy, of the market. Jesus' life is economically 'valued', which implies it is subject to a price determination, and it turns out to be the price of a slave. His life is handed over as a possession on the base of betrayal, so a criminal act of buying and selling: the second perversion. And the yield of this 'blood-money' is used at the same time to express the deepest possible contempt: the money is intentionally sent, or even pushed toward and **into** the

domain of the dead - this is the third perversion. Jesus is not only turned into an object of the market economy in its most criminal side, but also by the same market economy identified as an item which belongs to the realm of the dead and of those who are excluded.

That of course is not, and cannot be read as, accidental. Nothing is accidental in the history of Jesus' suffering. It is as if the Evangelist wants here to convey to us this deep message, that this realm of money and markets, which is usually seen by people as 'neutral' or only 'functional, is a part of life which, perhaps more than any other part of life, is full of sin and perversion, and therefore deeply needs redemption. It needs to be saved. In the orthodox-Christian tradition Jesus is often seen as the Servant of God, the One who voluntarily went down to the Kingdom of the dead to come back from its depth to arise as its Conqueror. If we follow this line, then we have to see economic life and the functioning of the market place in a different way from the usual view. Money and markets can simply not stand on their own autonomous feet. They need forgiveness, redemption, and therefore a constant (re)orientation to justice and to life-bearing sustainability, and last but not least: they should show a real openness to the foreigners, to the excluded. We can even say that Jesus was and is say the first of the excluded. And so we meet him still every day in the economy. This king in disguise can be found at the most neglected borders or corners of our marketplace, local but also global.

But there is even more which is striking in this passage. It is the continuous reference to the data of the Old Testament, to the Thora and the Prophets. Is there a reason for that? Obviously we can speak in our passage of a misuse of the Law. But that implies also the possibility of a positive use of the Law, which could be of healing significance, perhaps also for our own modern economies.

The topic is too broad to discuss as a whole. But there is at least one clue to be found in the explicit, and partially implicit, references in our text to the (use of) land, of money and of labour-slaves. It is as if the classical factors of production of every economic textbook: land (nature), capital and labour are returning in this passage, and no doubt they are there in an abused way. But behind that lurks the far more positive and even 'redemptive' outlook of the Thora on these three 'factors' of production. For in the economic system which we find in the Thora these three are always more than just instrumental factors. Land, labour and capital are placed in the context of communal life.

Leviticus 25, the chapter about the year of Jubilee, can serve here as a guide. The Jubilee deals with the return of people to their land - they have access once again to the primary resource of their existence. The motive of the Jubilee makes it clear that the sharing of the land by the poor has, in the Thora, a priority over all acts of buying and selling. *Land* as such is exempt from the workings of the market; just the potential value of future harvests is bought and sold. And the land itself shares in the seven-years rest (Lev 25:1-

4); it is, so to say, 'entitled' to receive the time to restore itself from the consequences of intensive human cultivation. *Labour*, so says the same chapter, should be devoid of harshness: "*do not drive your laborer with ruthless severity*" (v53) . And *capital* is imbedded in the life of the community by the commandment that it should not be withheld from the poor, but even loaned to them without asking a price: "*You should not charge him interest on a loan, either by deducting it in advance from the capital sum ,or by adding it on repayment*" (vv 35-36).

Now, of course, it is possible to look to these rules as awkward and totally antiquated indications of how to deal with factors of production and their prices. Are they not the expressions of an almost static, even feudal, agrarian economy, which missed almost every insight into the urgency of making a yearly economic surplus? We find here even the advice to consume the eventual surplus of any harvest in the same year, namely by inviting the widows and the Levites to go with you to the temple to arrange there a feast for however long it would take!

But let us forestall that, perhaps too hasty, conclusion, and by looking for a moment to the huge problems which characterise most of our present 'modern' economies. It then strikes us how many of these problems occur at what we could call the 'input side', or the 'factor-side, of the economy. They come to the fore as much in unemployment as in the stress of work, and they manifest a lack of care for nature and the environment, as well as enforcing non-access or non-availability of land and capital for those who need it most in the world. But problems like these do not stand on their own. They all have some kind of relationship with the enormously high emphasis which is given to the output-side in our economies. We see this in the necessity of a maximum rate of growth and consequently in the most efficient use of all the factors of production. And is that not also the main motive driving the present process of globalization?

It maybe, therefore, that we can learn here something essential from the Thora. Is it not that in every economy some kind of responsible balance is present and should be maintained between the conditions that prevail on the side of its inputs and those which are caused by its outputs? We could call this a balance between its 'internal' and its 'external' economic growth. If we consider labour, nature, land and capital as just instrumental factors, then they are only seen and valued in terms of what they can offer us by more output (or exports). And so, we are then in fact placing them outside the context of real life. Then factor-markets indeed become chill 'mechanisms of allocation', which are allowed to deal with living persons as objects, including them and excluding them from economic life according to the 'necessary laws' of increasing efficiency and profitability. But if there is any significance of redemption for economic life, then it lies, at least partially, in the healing of that deeply distorted imbalance. Each factor-price should in principle include

the costs of the necessary care for the human quality of labour and the sustainability of labour and be adapted to the living conditions of the needy. Even if that leads to higher prices, for which, certainly in the richer countries, no income-compensation should be asked.

The highest external growth or output of our economies should in any case never be allowed to be, or become, a tyrannous god. Also in their way of dealing with nature, labour and capital, our economies are called to serve a Master and forsake Mammon. For there is no other path towards justice and shalom.

Bob Goudzwaard ©