

Wealth & the Presbyterian Church

22 September 2019, Cashmere Presbyterian, Silvia Purdie

Readings:

1 Timothy 6: 6-16

Luke 16:10-15

Surely no two years in Presbyterian church history were more dramatic than 1546 and 1547. At the beginning of 1546 Scotland was firmly under Roman authority, centred at St Andrews on the east coast, centred in the person of David Beaton, Cardinal, Archbishop and the Pope's personal representative in Scotland. By August 1547 John Knox and over a hundred Scottish Lairds and other reformers were imprisoned on French ships. Many had died violent deaths, including David Beaton. Scottish royalty was still Catholic, but the tide had turned. The Scots were becoming Presbyterian.

Let me tell you more about David Beaton. Although Scottish born he was French aristocracy. Most of his career was spent as the Scottish ambassador to France, and to Rome. Born into wealth and privilege, he was ambitious for power. He found this in the church. He was never a priest or pastor, he was appointed straight at the top, as a bishop, and then to the position of maximum wealth and influence in Scotland, the Archbishop of St Andrews, which came with a vast palace overlooking the sea. David Beaton was very involved with the Scottish crown, working closely with King James the 5th, and he apparently forged James' will in an attempt to be Regent for James' young daughter Mary. David Beaton had a long-time defacto wife, and 8 children, despite enforcing the ban on marriage for clergy. David Beaton vehemently opposed the Reformation, imprisoning preachers in his black dungeon, and burning George Wishart at the stake in his palace courtyard. David Beaton had increased his personal holdings throughout the district, angering local Lairds.

At the crack of dawn on the 29th of May 1546 a group of Lairds and reformers entered St Andrews Palace, pretending to be stone masons on a renovation job. They pulled David Beaton from his bed and killed him. I'll spare you the gory details. They evicted his family and staff, and for one year St Andrews Palace was Reformation HQ. Reformers and their families moved in and lived among the gold and finery of the palace. John Knox came, and began his preaching there. Then in July 1547 the French Navy turned up in full force, battered their way in and killed or captured the reformers. John Knox spent the next year and a half rowing and being whipped to within an inch of his life. before the English King managed to negotiate for their release.

What a formative experience that must have been. No wonder John Knox described the Pope as the anti-Christ and taught so passionately against the power and wealth and hypocrisy of the Roman church.

I want to focus this morning on one aspect of our church history, which this story throws vividly into focus – the power of wealth. Through all the other battles runs the theme of money. When those early reformers looked at the vast system that was the Roman Catholic church they saw a inequalities of wealth that were deeply offensive to the gospel. They saw poor people being squeezed for every penny, their love for dead relatives twisted and manipulated for financial gain. They saw – first hand at St Andrews – the lifestyle of those at the head of the church, with all that money could buy.

It is easy to imagine John and his friends reading Luke 16, in that palace, how fresh would have been Jesus' words to the Pharisees:

"You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others;

*but God knows your hearts;
for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God. ...
You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and wealth”*

The Presbyterian ethos was egalitarian at the core, and the reformation church buildings and church governance reflected that.

Then, 300 years later, issues of wealth and privilege again came to the fore, as the ministers and local churches walked out of their churches. The crunch question – who paid for ministry? If the minister was on the Laird’s payroll then the Laird was in charge of the ministry. The ‘wee frees’ walked on their principles, for freedom from control. They refused to sell out the gospel for the sake of financial security, and so formed the Free Church.

1 Timothy 6 was a powerful motivation for them:

there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.

How important to us is our financial security?

Church history is in part the story of how people of faith move between these poles of wealth and poverty, status and independence. We have models of people like John Knox who fought against entrenched systems of inequality and oppression, people who turned their backs on financial security in order to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. But financial security keeps on seeming like a good thing, and we keep on getting drawn back into worldly values, the logic and attraction of wealth.

Our Christian values and ethos actually work well at achieving financial security. The Presbyterians who helped build New Zealand set out to make a new country, and to make a good living for their families. They valued education, for young women as well as men, and built schools everywhere. They expected to work hard, and expected to be involved in work both at work and in their communities. They encouraged generosity and community building, taking care of those in need. They worked collaboratively; the ‘presbyterian’ ethos built teams for decision making, and rejected leaders who expected obedience. They upheld strict moral codes. They had no time for fripperies like dancing or music. They certainly didn’t waste their money on booze.

This just happens to be the perfect combination of values and practices for succeeding in business. Presbyterians in New Zealand became successful entrepreneurs, school principals, business men and community leaders. Education, hard work, generosity, team work and high ethics is exactly the recipe for how to make money, not just for yourself but for the benefit of your whole community.

Which is a good thing. But it is also a dangerous thing. For as Jesus put it so bluntly 2000 years ago, we cannot serve two masters. If the making of money becomes our goal then we can no longer follow Christ with all our heart and mind and strength and soul.

Currently I am reading Gary Hoag, whom I was delighted to meet a couple of weeks ago at a seminar on church governance. He quotes this same reading we have today from Luke, and then asks some tough questions:

Have we been faithful in handling worldly wealth, or do we serve it as our master? What does our behavior demonstrate that we value? Have we been trustworthy to put God's resources to work or have we set up financial safety nets in case God's plan for us differs from our own?

Our idols are whatever we depend on in place of God. Do we have any safety net other than God? For most of us, it is money and possessions.

Obedience demands the divine fortitude to say no to the temptation to place our trust in anything but God alone, and to say yes instead to trusting and serving God in how we live and lead.

(Hoag, Gary K.. The Choice: The Christ-Centered Pursuit of Kingdom Outcomes).

I'm not saying these are easy questions to answer. It's personal. Chris and I own a lovely brand new house in Upper Hutt with tenants paying us good rent. We have that precisely as a financial safety net, a sensible decision to maximise our personal security in the long term and to provide for our children's future. We experienced God's blessing and provision in the timing and the way it came together. We are indeed blessed with what we have. We are wealthy. It is an enormous privilege to own property. But it is a temptation to think of it as 'ours', and for it to minimise how much we need to rely on God. I want to say no to placing my trust in anything but God alone. I 100% want to 'say yes to trusting and serving God in how I live and lead'.

Our DNA as a Presbyterian church includes on one hand radical rebellion against the status quo, and on the other hand our place, especially here in New Zealand, as the religion of upper-middle class. Our church here in Cashmere is seen in our city as a symbol of tradition and status. We don't like to be stereotyped with wealth and privilege, but it is part of our formation as a local church in this particular suburb. Our property and our bank accounts, both personally and collectively as a church, insulate us from risk. What do we rely on?

The story of David Beaton and the 1-year occupation of St Andrews Palace by the early reformers throws into the starkest possible relief the tensions for the church around wealth and status. Social inequality is just as much of an issue for our society as it was in 1546, the gap between rich and poor just as dramatic. Where will do we find ourselves as people of Christ in this picture?

As we move shortly into our Annual General Meeting we are reminded of the resources and assets that we are blessed with, our buildings, our bank accounts, but most of all our people. As we move from the worship of God to the stewardship of our church, may we hold this invitation to trust in God alone, to depend on God alone. As we move out from church into our everyday lives, of work and shopping and decisions about homes and businesses, may we hold this invitation to trust in God alone, to depend on God alone. For God in Christ has formed you, blessed you abundantly, loved and accepted you. To God be the glory, in the church and in our lives. Amen.