

## Wealth and Common Good

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Wealth is about more than money. It's about assets (property, goods, valuables, money, equity funds and other economic resources) that can be manipulated without the hindrance of debt. Thomas Piketty made precisely this point recently when his surprise bestseller *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* described the historical evolution of income and wealth distribution in advanced economies.<sup>1</sup> Piketty's central observation was that the return on capital outstrips economic growth such that wealth rises and inequality increases. Wealth, inherited wealth especially, affects money flows and slows economic growth in societies where inequality is highest because fewer people have money to spend. Free market economics does not spread riches fairly or 'lift all boats' because wealth inequality typically hinders growth and leads to the control of political processes by a tiny high-income and high-wealth elite. This essay argues that Christianity is not always anti-wealth *per se* but has much to say about the use of wealth for common good not merely personal advantage.

### Through the Eye of a Needle

[Chris Wildt cartoon of businessman father sitting at desk: 'Son, I'm leaving you with the 3 vital elements of success - self confidence, sound education, and inherited wealth.']

It's funny how humour works. The routine interaction between father and son in this cartoon is expected to concern life-attitude, the virtues, and education more generally, not the brute fact of the boy's inheritance. To the sardonically-minded, it is the inheritance that will really bring success not high moral standards or education. Hence the raised eye-brow or twitch of the lips because we don't expect this dark truth to be faced so openly.

Jesus used humour in one of the most famous New Testament passages about wealth:

And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

mother.” And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.” When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” But he said, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” (Luke 18:24-27; see also Mark 10:25; Matthew 19:24)<sup>2</sup>

It’s not quite ‘Hey, did you hear the one about the camel?’ but Jesus uses exaggeration to the point of folly or ridicule. Like the saying ‘if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away’ (Matthew 5:29) or ‘Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?’ (Matthew 7:3), the idea of a camel going through the eye of a needle stretches the idea beyond normal proportions thus making the point effectively.<sup>3</sup> Exaggeration draws attention to difficulties facing the extremely rich wanting to enter the kingdom of heaven, both to encourage a change in behavior and raise awareness.

So, how exaggerated is the point being made? Can one who fails to distribute all their goods to the poor remain a disciple of Jesus Christ? In the ancient church merely a small number of ascetics applied Jesus’ instruction to the rich ruler ‘Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor’ in their lives. So Peter Brown observed recently in his magnum opus *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome and the Making of Christianity in the West*. Relatively few took Jesus’ teaching literally while most lived humdrum lives serving God amidst earning a living, running a business, trading honourably and honestly, giving alms to the poor, and such like: ‘To treat the renouncers of wealth as the heroes and heroines of a “true” Christianity and to view all other forms of religious giving as somehow a betrayal of the essential radicalism of the Christian movement is to merely echo the high-minded language of the ascetic movement’.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> All citations from the *English Standard Version* Anglicized Edition (London: Collins, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Some have suggested that the eye of a needle (Gr. *belone*) was the name of a small gate in the walls of the city of Jerusalem, or that the Greek word *kamelos* could have been pronounced *kamilos* which was the word for a ship’s cable or rope, i.e., difficult to thread through the eye of a domestic needle. See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), p.1485.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550AD*, p. xxv.

Yet the choice in Luke's gospel for the rich man addressed by Jesus is stark. He may either enter the kingdom of God or keep his wealth. And the question of whether the renunciation of wealth is the only route for the disciple of Christ who hopes to enter the kingdom of God echoes down the centuries. Other New Testament passages suggest that Jesus did not disallow private property. Jesus told the parable of the talents to chastise laziness and lack of due diligence with respect to God-given resources (Matt. 25:14-30), ate with rich as well as poor (Mark 15:43; Luke 19:1-10), did not exclude anyone from the kingdom of God solely on the grounds of wealth but required all to be faithful stewards of the gifts God has given. Like early church believers, present-day readers might distinguish at this point between 'literal' and 'direct' interpretations of the text and suggest that, while Jesus' words apply to all disciples 'directly', they might not apply 'literally'.<sup>5</sup> Such a reading would be convenient but runs the obvious risk of blunting the challenge of the passage to seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness.

[Andrew Evans cartoon of wealthy-looking husband and wife: "Don't fret about that Kingdom of Heaven stuff - you would obviously liquidise the camel first."]

The issue for our purposes remains the extent of Jesus' exaggeration in conversation with the rich man, whether we can ease ourselves off the sharp-pointed needle of literalism, and the application of his words to all believers without compromise the nub of the parable that concerns the all-inclusive and absolute claim of God upon all earthly wealth. Studies have shown that regular exercise may alter how a person experiences pain. Aerobic training and other forms of acute exercise increase pain tolerance in healthy individuals. Significant increases in aerobic fitness *and* pain tolerance have been seen in test groups. The longer we continue to work out the greater our tolerance for discomfort can become.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, perhaps, the longer we longer we continue in unquestioning (albeit modest) prosperity, the greater our tolerance for the discomfort of Jesus' words can become.

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine made this distinction in *On Christian Doctrine* Bk III, chap. 5.

<sup>6</sup> M.D. Jones, J. Booth, J.L. Taylor, B.K. Barry, 'Aerobic training increases pain tolerance in healthy individuals', *Med Sci Sports Exerc.* 2014 Aug;46(8):1640-7.

## Building Bigger Barns

The various literary genres of the gospels have various modes of communication. Some parables employ types of satire to illustrate, expose and denounce tendencies in human nature. One such parable is about building bigger barns in which the foolishness of seeing wealth merely as means for the accumulation of yet more wealth is parodied to draw attention to its ultimate futility.

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:13-30 )

According to the law and custom of the time, an older son would have received twice the inheritance of other sons but would have been obliged to support his mother and any unmarried sisters. It would have been commonplace for brothers to leave the inheritance intact and farm it together although the law provided for the possibility of brothers asking for their share. The point at issue appears to be an elder brother’s dilatoriness in handing over the younger brother’s material share in the inheritance, and the younger brother approaches Jesus for a judgment. Jesus declines to pronounce (though had been addressed as a ‘Rabbi’ authorized to arbitrate) but tells the parable that, according to Luke’s comment, shifts the conversation to the eternal inheritance of those ‘rich toward God’.<sup>7</sup>

The parable is characteristically brief but, for those of us sympathetic to the inquirer’s situation, the humour is discomfortingly sharp. The man in the crowd who asked the question was seeking resolution in customary manner of a long-standing grievance when Jesus replies with his account of the ‘fool’ whose covetousness is made a lesson for all who have ears to hear. It would have been accepted practice to take a legal grievance to a Rabbi. Instead of a decision on his case, however, the man

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<sup>7</sup> François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51-19:27* trans. Donald S. Deer (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2013), p.206.

got a stinging message preached to the whole crowd about the dangers of wealth and desire for possessions. Anger and embarrassment perhaps rose in his face and we can imagine him wince as Jesus makes no concession to his difficulties but cuts to the quick where money and wealth are concerned.

The literary context is a conversation between Jesus and the crowds during which Jesus railed against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, saying: ‘Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known’ (Luke 12:2). What has been said in the dark shall be heard in the light and has been whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed from the rooftops! Jesus’ transparency agenda is cosmic. ‘Beware’, he says (Gr. προσέχω *prosechō*), in a combination of both warning and threat, because anything unworthy will be made public. Hypocrisy will be exposed. ‘Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. ... [F]ear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him’ (Luke 12:5). Wealth brings protection against some of life’s ills but God is more to be feared than any earthly ambition or power. ‘Luke’s God’, says commentator François Bovon, who is ‘stronger than death, is also more dangerous than death’.<sup>8</sup>

That the rich man’s land produced plentifully is not morally problematic. The man is not reprehended for being rich, for farming well, storing his grain sensibly or planning for the future. His profits were not ill-gained. The problem seems to lie in his attitude to profit and wanting to hoard wealth rather than use it with and for others. In a conversation with a Pharisee just before this text, Jesus had lambasted his practice of tithing mint and cumin and other herbs but neglecting true love and justice, that is, attending to the letter of the law but not its spirit (Luke 11:37-44). ‘Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it’. (Luke 11:44) This dark saying associates modes of social acceptability that mask greed with spiritual death; the venom of Jesus’ reply is not directed at the practice of tithing *per se* but at the deceptions of the heart. Similarly in the parable, the problem is not with storing the corn safely or the farmer’s stewardship of his wealth but with the point at which his attitude to wealth crossed into vice: ‘carried away by the logic of profit, he wanted to cap the success of his enterprise by the enlargement of his warehouses. ... There is no question about there being goods, therefore something

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<sup>8</sup> Bovon, *Luke 2*, p.180.

positive. But on the landowner's lips, the emphasis is on property, "my goods", "my crops".<sup>9</sup>

[Roy Delgado cartoon of angry-looking, elderly businessman: 'I don't ask for much, all I want is more.']

The moral problem in the parable lies not with the wealth that accrues to hard work and the blessings of the harvest but the fool's becoming ensnared in the allure of yet more reserves and failing to use his wealth well. Peter Brown writes about a wealth in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries but his basic points are relevant here: 'Wealth came mainly from labor on the land. This means that, every year, over 60 percent of the wealth of the Roman empire was gathered at harvesttime .... For everyone, the harvest was a time of finality. The piles of grain gathered on the threshing floor were all that there was. And only a small portion of these piles would remain in the hands of the farmers. ... [T]he rich had privileged access to wider and more lucrative markets. ... The rich alone could also defeat time'.<sup>10</sup> The rich man in the parable could store the abundance of the harvest and wait to sell when the prices were high, that is, when grain was scarce and people hungry. Those who could store the surplus of the harvest by gathering it into their granaries, says Brown, were the ones who could take advantage, every year, of the rise in prices. They could 'make a killing' in times of shortage. 'Not surprisingly, therefore, granaries emerge as the economic villains of the ancient world'.<sup>11</sup>

For the ancient church interpreting Jesus' teaching the cost of wealth is both social and spiritual. Life brings trials of two kinds, writes St Basil the Great, Archbishop of Cappadocia, Asia Minor (*d.* 329AD), in a sermon preached on this text in a sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, in the middle of the 'Ordinary' season. Either the afflictions of poverty test our souls as gold is tried in a furnace, or the very prosperity of our lives is an occasion for trial and temptation.<sup>12</sup> Those for whom the fields bring forth plenty and the vines hang heavy with grapes but are hard-

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<sup>9</sup> Bovon, *Luke 2*, p.200.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550AD* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 13-14.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, *Through the Eye*, p 14.

<sup>12</sup> Basil the Great, Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, 'I will pull down my barns' in M.F. Toal, Ed. and Transl. *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers* Vol. 3 (London: Longmans, Green, 1959), p.325.

hearted and indifferent to the poor, immovable and implacable, should be more fearful of the morrow than the hungry.

*If riches abound, set not your heart upon them (Ps. 62:11). ... And just as a wide stream is distributed through the fruitful earth by many channels, so let your riches flow, that by many means they may reach the homes of the poor. Wells, when they are drawn from, flow forth in a purer and more abundant stream. Where they are in disuse they grow foul. And so do riches grow useless, left idle and unused in any place; but moved about, passing from one person to another, they serve the common advantage and bear fruit.*<sup>13</sup>

If one is fortunate enough to have ‘riches abound’, the expectation is that this wealth is put to common advantage so that it bears fruit more than the immediate recipient. The rich man had failed to think and act proactively about how others might benefit from his wealth and opted instead for an investment plan that built walls around his profits. His only consideration was his personal security and comfort. He had omitted to think of others and, says Basil, thereby turning his wealth into a stagnant pond of fetid water likely to do more harm than good. This man who enjoyed physical comforts and prosperity was more truly wretched in his abundance and miserable in his good fortune.

Thomas Piketty and St Basil seem to agree that there is no general tendency towards greater economic equality. The wealthy can build bigger barns to ensure that their capital will grow but the poor cannot, and so social inequality tends to increase across the generations. ‘For you wheat becomes gold, wine grows into gold, wool is woven into gold. All that is brought and sold, every human activity, brings you gold. Gold itself brings forth gold, when you multiply it at interest’, writes St Basil.<sup>14</sup> While conducting business profitably is not morally reprehensible, the temptation for those with assets is to look to a famine to make more money and become a dealer in human misery. Avarice, ‘your eyes ever on money’ but never taking a look at one’s fellow human being, so that inequality increases becomes a way of life.<sup>15</sup> Poverty is the lack of a thousand things, writes Basil, and can be defined in many ways, but the critical point is the following:

That bread you hold in your clutches: that belongs to the starving; that cloak you keep locked away in your wardrobe, that belongs to the naked; those

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<sup>13</sup> Basil, ‘I will pull down my barns’, p.329.

<sup>14</sup> Basil, ‘I will pull down my barns’, p.329.

<sup>15</sup> Basil, ‘I will pull down my barns’, p.328.

shoes that are going to waste with you, they belong to the barefooted; the silver you buried away, that belongs to the needy.<sup>16</sup>

Early teachers of the church understood poverty with reference to physical impact on the body and relation to debt, not only as undifferentiated categories contrasted with one another.<sup>17</sup> When a person is cold, hungry or sick due to poverty it's time for others to get serious about relieving their situation. If this poverty is due in any way to exploitation by the rich, including low wages or debt bondage, there should be moral outrage. Christ himself suffers in the bodies of those people without adequate nutrition or stiff with cold: 'For when you the servant are drunk with wine, while he the Master suffers hunger, and has not even the food His body needs, what meaning has the name of servant for you? And will it trouble you the more that you live in a three-storied house, while He is without shelter ....'.<sup>18</sup> The responsibility of wealth is to ensure that these impacts on the body do not happen.

### Common Good as Shared Project

It's important to be clear at this juncture that common good is *not* an idea or thing whose substance may be defined but a set of responsibilities pertaining to a shared project of which all are part. Contrary to what some neoliberals have claimed, the common good neither has nor requires clearly defined substantive content that may be specified *a priori* because common good is more like an activity, set of responsibilities or common project, inconceivable when individuals are thought about as isolated one from another. F.A. Hayek talked about 'the constitutional limitation of man's knowledge and interests, the fact that he cannot know more than a tiny part of the whole of society and that therefore all that can enter into his motives are the immediate effects in which his actions will have in the sphere he knows.'<sup>19</sup> His concern was that no-one possesses a fuller comprehension of the good of society as a whole than anyone else. Christian tradition, he says, urges following one's conscience

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<sup>16</sup> Basil, 'I will pull down my barns', p.332.

<sup>17</sup> Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, ch. 3.

<sup>18</sup> St John Chrysostom in Toal, *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, Vol. 3, p.318. Sermon Seventh Sunday after Pentecost. 2 Cor. 8:15.

<sup>19</sup> F.A. Hayek, *Individualism and the Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.14.



‘for the particular things of which *he* knows and ... cares,’<sup>20</sup> the implication being that talk of common good is nonsensical and dangerous.

Hayek’s mistake was to suppose that responsible talk of the common good entails the idea that the elite few know what’s good for everyone else. Aristotle said that children are the good common (*koinon agathon*) to parents — a shared task or responsibility oriented toward building a common life, a family.<sup>21</sup> The common good is humanity’s shared project of living together, not an idea or thing whose substance may be defined but a set of responsibilities pertaining to a shared project of which all are part. It takes different form(s) at different times and places. Thomas Aquinas’s related theology of natural law is more like a set of requirements and responsibilities than something to which reference can be made in a fixed way. Consider his answer to the question whether there is natural law in us:

it is evident that all things partake somewhat of the eternal law, in so far as, namely, from its being imprinted on them, they derive their respective inclinations to their proper acts and ends. Now among all others, the rational creature is subject to Divine providence in the most excellent way, in so far as it partakes of a share of providence, by being provident both for itself and for others. Wherefore it has a share of the Eternal Reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end: and this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called the natural law.<sup>22</sup>

For Aquinas, the essence of law is something pertaining to reason; law has a necessary reference or relation to reason. It ‘is the essential use in which law is in the reason, functioning as regulating something else’.<sup>23</sup> As Jean Porter observes, Aquinas’s concession to contingency is substantive. Like his fellow scholastics, he ‘leaves room for considerable flexibility with respect to specific ways of understanding God’s creative activity’ both in nature and politics.<sup>24</sup> The common good is not pre-determined but about the conditions necessary for the flourishing of all. Moral reasoning is always contextual and embedded, requiring an element of improvisation because every agent is somehow confronted with novel circumstances

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<sup>20</sup> Hayek, *Individualism and the Economic Order*, p.14.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, NE 1162a28-9.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*. Blackfriars Edition (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1963), I–II, 91, 2.

<sup>23</sup> R. J. Henle, S.J., *The Treatise on Law* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p.120.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), p.85.

and dilemmas. Within divine providence, however, a family thrives in its relation to a wider community, local communities are part of a larger people or nation-state, a nation-state prospers through relations (e.g., trading relations) with other nation-states, and so on. The common good is more verb than noun, that is, a collaborative project that might look vastly different in one community or culture as compared to another.

### Wealth as Responsibility

Today, in our own context, the debate about wealth and common good is *inter alia* about economic inequality. Piketty's *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* caused a stir and demonstrates helpfully that free-market and patrimonial capitalism produces terrifying inequalities but says less than Christian tradition about possible connection between wealth and common good. His point is that the seriously wealthy are likely to enjoy the highest returns because capital tends to grow faster than economies, especially those with significant inequality. Where there are no other forces pushing against the accumulation of wealth by a few, inequality will increase ineluctably.

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* says yet more than Piketty about why inequality of wealth matters. This book argues persuasively that life is generally more pleasant for everyone in relatively equal societies. '[T]he differences between more and less equal societies are large — problems are anything from three times to ten times as common in the more unequal societies'.<sup>25</sup> The benefits of greater equality in health, education, low prison population, suicide rates, reported life-satisfaction, and more, are shared across larger proportions of the population in more rather than less equal societies. In other words, unless you are one of the über rich, your life would probably be better if wealth, health, education and general well being were spread more equally amongst everyone. If Britain were to concentrate on making citizen's incomes more equal, the rates of violence, obesity, imprisonment, addiction, broken families, vandalized neighbourhoods, and more, would probably decrease with positive consequences for everyone.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2010) p.173.

<sup>26</sup> For a useful review, see Lynsey Hanley, 'The Way We Live Now' at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/mar/13/the-spirit-level> (accessed 28 October, 2014).

The debate about economic equality is complex for many reasons not least that equality means different things to different people (e.g., some kind of proportionality in the way people are treated; formal equality under the law where all are treated the same; the absence of discrimination resulting from inherited skin colour, ethnic identity, sexuality, place of birth, or such like; equality of opportunity or outcome).<sup>27</sup> Economic equality in society is irrelevant for some if the poor are getting richer.<sup>28</sup> For others the emphasis should be on harm caused not inequality *per se* because not all forms of inequality are inherently unjust and some are more unfair than others.<sup>29</sup> Christianity has tolerated extreme social inequality, including slavery, in the course of its history.

Even so, the basic principle that we have been encountering in Jesus' teaching and that of the early church is that the purpose of economic activity is to meet human needs not accumulate wealth for the few, and is rooted in the yet deeper truths that every human being was created equal before God, is included equally in Christ, and will be judged as such within the eschatological framework of eternity. Contextual gulfs between first-century Palestine, ancient Cappadocia, and the UK today, preclude any simple transference of meaning but demand, rather, the labour of interpretation amidst and across difference. Neither Jesus nor the ancient church discussed the characteristics of late capitalism, globalized markets, money flows, mass consumption, international markets, *per se*. But Jesus and the tradition talked frequently about attitudes to wealth, the acquisition of wealth, its use and disposal, and more. St Basil envisioned wells dug for the benefit of all in his allegory of wealth as water flowing pure and abundant for the whole community. At the heart of their teaching was that wealth is not only the stock of all assets held by private individuals, corporations and governments that can be traded in markets but a trust in the service of God and others.

In a useful summary of the ancient teaching of the church, Fr Stanley Harkas states: 'The Fathers observed that Christ did not seek the destruction of individual

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<sup>27</sup> For these designations of equality, see Julian Rivers, 'The Abuse of Equality', *Ethics in Brief* Summer 2006 (Vol.11 No.1) <http://klice.co.uk/uploads/Ethics%20in%20Brief/Rivers%20v11.1%20pub.pdf> (accessed 29 October, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Deirdre McCloskey, 'Equality lacks relevance if the poor are growing richer' *Financial Times* August 11, 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Adam Posen, 'The economic inequality debate avoids asking who is harmed', *The Financial Times*, August 5, 2014.

property or private ownership, but rather its sanctified use. In this view, wealth is a trust held by the individual in the service of God.<sup>30</sup> While Christianity has not typically demanded that people be treated identically in socio-political terms, there have been clear limits to what social inequality might entail and especially when the love of money (not money itself) amongst the few produces grinding poverty for the many. Economic activity is not denounced as inherently wicked but seen to exist for the mutual well-being of all — one test of which today is whether it tends to increase or decrease economic inequality. Jesus’ teaching and Christian tradition offer an important perspective on the relation between wealth and common good, especially where the cost of wealth accumulated in the hands of a few is a sick society in which few flourish to their full potential.

Is this anti-capitalist? Where capitalism means an economic system that subordinates people and human dignity to the means of production and accumulation of wealth, the reflections above suggest it to be indeed contrary to Christianity. Hence Pope John Paul II condemned capitalist practices where:

man is in a way treated on the same level as the whole complex of the material means of production, as an instrument and not in accordance with the true dignity of his work—that is to say, where he is not treated as subject and maker, and for this very reason as the true purpose of the whole process of production.<sup>31</sup>

People matter more than profit. Profit should never be the end but only the means of economic endeavour. Where capitalism means the subordination of that which God has given to humanity in common for the corrupt exploitation of the many by the few, ‘yes’ it conflicts with humanity’s God-given project of living together for the good of all. If, however, our interest is with capitalism not as a thing but a process, continually in motion and evolving, the movement of capital and associated practices whereby money is invested and otherwise used to increase its value, the question becomes more complex. Consider David Harvey’s comment when citing Karl Marx’s *Capital*:

Capital “comes out of circulation, enters into it again, preserves and multiplies itself within circulation, emerges from it with an increased size,

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<sup>30</sup> Stanley S. Harakas, ‘An Eastern Orthodox Perspective on Economic Life, Property, Work, and Business Ethics’ in *Spiritual Goods* 2001:143-163 (2001), p.145.

<sup>31</sup> John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, §7 at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html) (accessed 29 October, 2014).

and starts the same cycle again and again". The powerful sense of flow is palpable. Capital is process, and that is that.<sup>32</sup>

For our purposes, this means that it's difficult (and perhaps unwise) to reduce such a process to a fixed definition and hence difficult (and perhaps nonsensical) to denounce capitalism as if it were a single, transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon.

What matters more than fixing a definition and thereafter declaring Christianity to be anti-capitalist is what happens when wealth and its accumulation violates the practical truths entailed in God's gift of the world to humanity in common, denies that humanity is created in the image of God and every person for good, and that the end (*telos*) of the wealth forthcoming from the earth and human labour is to serve the common good, and results in poverty that impacts detrimentally on a person's body. Jesus did not require Zacchaeus to leave his job but required that he not defraud the taxpayers (Luke 19:1-10). The Good Samaritan had money available to advance the innkeeper what might be needed (Luke 10:25-37). In the parable about a nobleman returning from a journey to find that some of his servants have used his money well to realize a profit but others have not, the nobleman is presented as expecting his servants to calculate for themselves the risk / benefit ratio, and make sensible investments (Luke 19:11-27).<sup>33</sup> Wealth is not merely as 'thing' but a complex set of responsibilities. The cost of wealth can be damnation or the burden of using it well for common good.

It is not necessary to extract from the gospels a blanket condemnation of all wealth creation. But three propositions and related implications flow from basic Christian convictions:

1. *God is good and God's will for good is the very truth of creation or fundamental reality of the universe.* Hence we must deny the fatalism that breeds indifference to the human costs of poverty, and refuse to accept defeat in the face of the persistent hardship of so many.
2. *God's goodness and justice is the end or goal of human history.* Hence we must resist the commonly accepted cultural worth that attaches to the trappings of wealth and power that flows from wealth and focus instead on

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<sup>32</sup> David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital* Vol. 1 (London: Verso, 2010), p.92.

<sup>33</sup> Bovon, *Luke 2*, p.609.

the word of God which denounces all practices that crush the poor and anticipates the end times when many large and beautiful houses will be desolate (Is. 5:9) and nomads shall eat among the ruin of the rich (Is. 5:17).

3. God's goodness and justice place a *practical demand* upon every human being. God's word demands practical ways in which to resist both the occasional and systematic exploitation of the many to fill the storehouses of the few. The gospel excludes the privileging of some at the cost of the neighbour's good.

The practical task is to address the realities of UK society today in this light and, where necessary, question what we find. To this end, we might consider a recent government-sponsored report by the National Institute for Economic and Social Research and Landman Economics, published by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission which considered the prospects for reducing child poverty in the UK.<sup>34</sup> It predicts that, by 2020/2021, if earnings rise in line with the latest forecast by the government's Office for Budget Responsibility, 21% of families with children will be living in poverty on the relative measure — 11 percentage points above the government target of fewer than 10% of children living in households where net income is less than 60% of median or typical household income and 3.5 percentage points higher than the proportion living in poverty in 2010/11. Absolute child poverty in 2020 (defined as experiencing material deprivation) is forecast at 24%.

Combine this data on in-work poverty and the picture is dismal. The most recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation annual *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion* report, written by the New Policy Institute, says that just over half of the 13 million UK citizens in poverty, that is, surviving on less than 60% of the national median income, were from working families. The study reports around 13 million people in poverty in the UK of whom around 6.7 million are in a family where someone works. The remaining 6.3 million are in workless working-age families or families where the

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<sup>34</sup> Howard Reed and Jonathan Portes for the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, *Understanding the parental employment scenarios necessary to meet the 2020 Child Poverty Targets* June 2014. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/318073/3b\\_Poverty\\_Research\\_-\\_Final.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/318073/3b_Poverty_Research_-_Final.pdf) (accessed 29 October, 2014). See also *Child Poverty Act 2010*, Chapter 9 [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/9/pdfs/ukpga\\_20100009\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/9/pdfs/ukpga_20100009_en.pdf) (accessed 29 October, 2014).

adults were retired. ‘*This is the first time in the history of this data series where in-work poverty has made up the majority of poverty.*’<sup>35</sup>

Our GDP (Gross Domestic Product) as calculated by the International Monetary Fund compares favourably with other nations. Figures for 2012 ranked us 6<sup>th</sup> in a list of 185 nation states.<sup>36</sup> The UK has the 6<sup>th</sup> largest national economy in the world. Something is wrong when, in a country this wealthy, the number of people in low-paid jobs is rising and average incomes falling such that Oxfam reports: ‘millions of families across the UK are living below the breadline. ... 20,247,042 meals were given to people in food poverty in 2013/14 by the three main food aid providers. This is a 54 percent increase on 2012/13. ... Despite their best efforts, many people cannot earn enough to live on.’<sup>37</sup> Charitable giving might be necessary to address immediate hardship but problems of this scale suggest that policy decisions to ensure a flexible labour market are hurting the poor unacceptably. Mindful of Jesus’ and traditional Christian teaching about the acquisition, use and relative value of earthly wealth, the data suggest that something is wrong in the UK today.

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<sup>35</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion* 2013. <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/monitoring-poverty-and-social-exclusion-2013> (accessed 29 October, 2014), p.26. Emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook* October 2012 <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2012/02/> (accessed 29 October, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> The Trussell Trust, *Below the Breadline: The Relentless Rise of Food Poverty in Britain* June 2014 [http://www.trusselltrust.org/resources/documents/foodbank/6323\\_Below\\_the\\_Breadline\\_web.pdf](http://www.trusselltrust.org/resources/documents/foodbank/6323_Below_the_Breadline_web.pdf) (accessed 29 October, 2014).