Children as Treasure

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The early missionaries in Central Australia encountered some unusual challenges. A pair of religious brothers once encountered a tribe who were very proud of the size and strength of their men. Apparently they had recently discovered that castration made a man taller and stronger. With such an advantage they could hunt and fight better that other tribes and the tribe was optimistic about its future. The missionaries had the awkward task of explaining why the tribe’s future was not so bright, a task complicated by their vows of celibacy.

The story is really a metaphor for the west. Despite our learning and history, our culture made the same decision about forty years ago. We made ourselves stronger and richer by adopting the convenience of the pill. The pill gave couples wealth through the magic of the double income. Children could come after the house was paid down and the new car was in the garage. The children did not come. After the car there was the holiday and after that the bigger house and the superannuation. Somebody else would have the children, after all they were an inconvenience and a cost. A few people did and the pill did not always work. There were mistakes. When mistakes grow up they know they are only half loved. We led the world in youth suicide. The half loved never quite learned the love of God that makes life worth living.

Unlike that aboriginal tribe, we ignored the advice of the celibate Christian teachers and believed in money instead. As a culture we substituted the pursuit of wealth for the pursuit of God. Sunday was once a time for church, now it is a time for shopping since we all work and Saturday is housework day. Nowhere is this more evident than in the phenomenon of superannuation. In 1970 few people retired with a fat superannuation cheque. They might have a house. They would likely have a family. Retirees in 1970 had known the experience of caring for their parents in their old age and would have anticipated that care from their own children-an act of love that could have been found in every healthy culture in the world back then. It is somehow easy to care for one’s own children, we are hard wired for it. It is a little harder to care for our parents, but it is a work filled with grace. It connects us to our history. It is an act of will and the greatest act of appreciation for those who suffered to bring us up. It makes us adults and worthy to be parents.

Superannuation is tidier though; and more efficient. Nicer to be rich in retirement than dependent. Nicer to tour the world and leave the children back with their jobs and their children. Nicer to be free and to pretend we need no one. We deserve it, we worked for it. We are the masters of it. The double income alchemy has made many people rich in retirement; the superannuation, the investment property, the well placed family house that can be exchanged at a profit for a place by the sea.

Slowly we are discovering that riches are not quite that simple. Our double incomes pushed house prices to dizzying heights and we grew accustomed to housing costs growing faster than incomes. That worked from 1970 to about 1990. What was really happening was that house prices were soaking up much of that second income. By 1990 about the same share of the family income was needed to pay for the house as the share that Dad’s wage alone had needed in 1970. The real zing
had gone from the game, but then we learnt another trick. With no kids in the house we could borrow more from the banks, and we did. From about 1993 we rollicked in debt. Australian households led the world in indebtedness. By 2002 the Reserve Bank had twigged and a few economists were concerned, but only a few-too few.

By 2005 we were past our necks in debt and borrowing stabilised. Soon afterwards the retail industry started to see the effects. They were not so jolly. Fortunately the American sub-prime collapse distracted us from our domestic catastrophe. It’s more fun to point are other people’s mismanagement than our own. The GFC followed and we suffered from their faults, not realising that they were our own. To some extent most of the economic woes of the Western world come from the same source. The west has faith in money, not children.

In the old days people knew they could not live on debt. We have forgotten that. Proverbs says the borrower is the slave of the lender, but who reads the Book of Proverbs. If they did they would find that children are our real treasure, at least according to God. It is our children who will buy our houses from us when we are old, and so doing maintain their prices. It is children who will work for the companies our superannuation has shares in, and in so doing maintain their profitability. For that matter it will be our children who will be buying the products from those same companies and in so doing keep them in business.

What value will those companies have when they have no customers and no employees? What value do houses have in ghost towns? Our stores of wealth for our retirement are being eaten by the moths and rust of our indulgence in those little pills.

The tribe we mentioned had believed that spirits in the rivers gave women babies when they bathed. We belief the finance system gives our money increase. Like them we are wrong. It is life that gives life and money has no life. It takes its increase from the life of the community. In earlier times to use money to take increase from the community was a mortal sin of stealing. Its name was usury and it stood out in the Catechism of the Council of Trent as the most cruel and relentless of extortions. Too few are concerned about usury any more. To speak of it in most learned conservative circles invites ridicule. We have moved past that.

We have moved so far past it that we also ridicule people who have children. The most significant group of those also do not practice usury. On both issues they reveal their debt to the Catholic Church, despite their religion being one of its many traditional opponents. It is said that the West regained Aristotle from the Muslims, but before its founder had started that religion he had ample opportunity to learn much of the Christian tradition. The economic thought of Islam has too much in common with the traditional Christian position to be entirely coincidental. At the time of Muhammad Christianity was the dominant religion and for centuries it had outlawed usury as immoral. Muhammad merely saw the wisdom and truth of rejecting money as a god and adopted the Christian position as he did with several other key issues.

By contrast, Luther and Calvin were supported by merchants and bankers who were wearied of the obligation to love their neighbours in the market place and who wanted an easier religion. Their revolt against Christianity would not have worked but for the support of the merchant class. Both leaders repaid their support with the softer morality that soon spawned capitalism. Since then for our sins we have had two major economic collapses each century. Hang on, the twentieth century
only had one! That is true, but only because the pill pushed the last one back about thirty years. It is nice it did not happen to spoil the coming of second millennia, but all that means is that when it does come it will be spectacular.

Yes, we have had the GFC, but our children still have shoes on their feet. It was a shake up, but not really that bad—perhaps a warning tremor. There is still Greece; and the US bailing itself out by sinking deeper in debt; and our inhuman cost of housing; and our aging population; and a generation of mistakes who are struggling to find meaning in the world and are taking more and more to chemical solutions. The list of dismal economic and social realities could go on. That aboriginal tribe’s survival depended on accepting a new religion, a religion of truth. The missionaries came along at just the right time to save them. As well as the story of Calvary, they taught them a little of western science.

One of the delights of Christianity is that it gives one the freedom of the truth. We are turning our backs on our science. Many people ignore the scientific reality that life beings at conception. Our universities are bulging with smart folk studying business while engineering courses languish. In business studies we teach the art of selling more, and for more, while paying others less. Aristotle would have called it chromatistics, the art of getting rich. Engineers may not get as rich as financiers, but they make the world a richer place. It takes science to make an engineer; it takes something less to make a businessman. To be inspired into a career that serves the world could be done no better than by a mother whose whole career is to teach love, supported by a husband who takes responsibility for all his actions and who with his life is witness to the reality that there is something in the world more valuable than money and more pleasurable than pleasure. The little pills have come at a great cost.

Our Holy Father’s recent encyclical, Caritas in Veritate, is a light for the world. It reminds us of the merits of gift and the transcendence of the family, and the futility of money. It is gentle and profound. We have started our century with all we need to unravel the fruits of our misdeeds. It only remains to spread the Word.

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