

**28 February 2021**  
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16  
Romans 4:13-25  
Mark 8:31-38

In Oscar Wilde's play, *Lady Windemere's Fan*, Lord Darlington quips that a cynic is "a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing."

A great deal of art has a prophetic edge to it, and Wilde was striking at what he saw as the problems with society. *Lady Windemere's Fan* was first performed in 1892, but the phrase Wilde puts on Darlington's lips is at least as pertinent now as it was almost 130 years ago. "These days, our government, our businesses, our media, and more seem to be dominated by what Wilde would have described as cynics. The idea that anyone in the 'real world' should even consider ethical, moral, philosophical or cultural values to be on a par with financial or economic 'value' appears whimsical, sentimental, even romantic. Hard-nosed, sensible, rational, practical people 'know' otherwise. It's the economy, stupid."<sup>1</sup>

When I left school I studied economics at university. I had the option of doing economics either through the School of Management or through the School of Social Sciences. I chose the Social Sciences because it meant I did not have to do the papers in accounting that were a compulsory part of the Management Studies degree: my little bit of secondary school experience of accounting had not warmed me to the subject in the least! However, both professional economists and accountants can be accused of being the same as Wilde's cynics.<sup>2</sup> We were taught how to put together models of systems that allow you to 'test' different scenarios so as to get specific outcomes. Turning a set of rules into an Excel spreadsheet or developing a regression equation makes this relatively easy, so that you can easily work out how to get the best from a system. You can look at the probability of getting a particular outcome, and look at the downsides of this outcome. You can use this kind of logic to determine the best price to charge for a product – perhaps you'll be better off selling a smaller number at a higher price, perhaps a larger number at a lower price. You can use it to decide whether to buy a cheap product

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<sup>1</sup> Bernal

<sup>2</sup> The following is from Bernal, with minor adaptation.

with a greater chance of breaking, or an expensive product that will last longer. You can use it to work out whether it's worth breaking the law – looking at the probability of being detected and the penalties if you are detected, and compare that with the extra expense of complying with the law. With a 'good' economist or accountant all these kinds of calculations become relatively simple. You need to know prices, have a little bit of expertise in Excel, and be good at estimating probabilities (which is particularly easy in the era of big data) but not a great deal more than that. But, to borrow an old idiom, economics or accounting "is a good servant but a very poor master". Being able to quantify things, to measure things, to compare and analyse can make it easy to miss the underlying issues. Focusing on the price makes it easy to miss the real value – and can turn what should be complex decisions based on combinations of ethics, morals, culture, empathy, philosophy and understanding of society into much simpler *games* based on numbers and calculations.

Our readings today all involve something of the concepts of economics and accounting.

Abraham, we read, "believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it/ credited it to him/ calculated it as righteousness."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus said, "What good is it/ what will it profit them for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul / their life? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul/ their life?"<sup>4</sup>

These passages prompt me to examine the kind of economics or accounting we do in relation to our souls, our very lives.

In Mark 8 we see that Peter has done a kind of calculation. In the accountancy of messianic expectation Jesus was supposed to come and take the throne in Jerusalem, toss out the Romans, and re-establish the fortunes of Israel as a kingdom under the reign of God. Going to his death was not supposed to be part of

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 15:6, quoted in Romans 4:3, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 8:36-37

that calculation: in this calculation a dead messiah was a failed messiah; a dead messiah was shown up to have been a false messiah.

The kind of calculation lying behind this thinking is common in the world. In this equation, “getting what one wants” is a function of the input variables of power or status, violent or oppressive methods, opportunity, extent of ambition, resources at one’s disposal. I imagine we can all think of examples where we’ve seen this kind of calculation in operation.

I don’t know about you, but I have to confess that I find myself doing this kind of calculation in my head at times. Worse, I have to confess that sometimes I have used this approach, trying to get my own way through the exercise of whatever power or status I have relative to the person or situation I’m trying to bend to my purposes.

And sadly too, we have seen and can see this kind of equation being applied within the church.

There are many other equations that might be at work within our lives and within the church at various places and times.

The classic calculation is the one that says that we can earn our salvation; that if we are sufficiently free from sin and if we do enough good and if we are regular at worship, then somehow we will have worked our way to eternal life. We all know this calculation – we refer to it as “salvation by works” or “works righteousness” – and we know that in the history of the faith it has been clearly shown up to be unbiblical. It is a fundamentally flawed calculation because it does not take into account the true character of God and the real condition of humankind. God’s approach to the salvation calculation is quite different: as Paul says, Abraham for example only had to trust God and God credited his account on the basis of God’s own covenant justice. And he notes that the same kind of calculation is available to us as well, when we trust in God who raised Jesus from the dead so that we too might enjoy God’s covenant justice.

And yet we can still be tempted into thinking and acting as if the flawed works righteousness equation will give us the right answer, our desired outcome of eternal life.

At the more immediate earthly level, there is the kind of calculation that sees the product of faith as being a comfortable life, with all our felt needs met. Often this equation has the input variables of prayer, perhaps fasting, being good, keeping the commandments. I find myself doing this kind of calculation from time to time: if I just pray harder, if I fast more, if I address those trivial besetting sins ..., then the things that worry me – my illnesses, my wellbeing, the wellbeing of my family and others I care for, my long-term financial security ... – then God will address all these things to my complete satisfaction.

I find that I especially do that kind of calculation in reverse, when things have not gone well, when I am struggling, when money is tight, when I'm not achieving my goals .... In times like those it can be easy to think "I should have prayed more, fasted, been more obedient...".

This kind of calculation is not far away from the equation of the prosperity gospel which has risen hugely in popularity in many parts of the world in the last twenty years or so. The prosperity gospel teaches "that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the 'sowing of seeds' through the faithful payments of tithes and offerings."<sup>5</sup> In the prosperity gospel, the equation is regarded as reliable as pressing "calculate now" on one's Excel spreadsheet – God's miraculous power is treated as automatic: get your confessions of faith right, get your tithing right, and the blessings will follow in direct proportion. In the prosperity gospel equation, wealth is always a sign of God's blessing. And since that is so, the reverse also applies: poverty or illness or early death is always a sign of God's curse, or human curses, or lack of faith. The upshot is then that people try to manipulate this equation: if I work harder, strive more, negotiate harder, exercise greater cunning, then I will enjoy material success and clearly will demonstrate that I am blessed by God.

And I confess how easy it is to be seduced into this kind of thinking.

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<sup>5</sup>Definition is found in Lausanne statement, from which some of the following ideas are also drawn.

Against the Prosperity Gospel kind of thinking we have to hear, for example, Jesus' words in Mark 8:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

But here too we can easily fall into an erroneous kind of calculation. This is the calculation of martyrdom, which in this erroneous form says that if I strive to give up this or that or everything, if I work hard to make myself miserable, or (in its most extreme version) if I throw myself into a situation in which I will die in the service of the gospel, then I will attain eternal life.

But there is an important but perhaps subtle distinction between dying for the sake of dying, and dying as the consequence of doing the right thing. In militant forms of radical Islam it seems we see something of the former attitude, where people throw their lives away in astonishing suicide attacks believing that they will be immediately received into Paradise. On the other hand, the apostle Paul and others are remembered and honoured as martyrs within Christianity not because they sought death, but because they were willing to endure persecution which ultimately led to execution as they faithfully followed the call of Jesus, his Lord.

And here we have the key. Jesus is *not* inviting us to make a calculation about the benefits of a particular course of action. Jesus is simply demanding that we follow him faithfully, *wherever he leads us* – and that will look different for different people at different times and in different contexts. And Jesus knows that, with the forces of evil in the world arrayed against him and his people, to follow him will entail great cost. Jesus is demanding though that we follow him without heed to that cost.

Peter reacted with shock at learning that the way of Jesus was the way of the cross. But as he was to learn, and as we need to learn, the cross is exactly the point at which God's kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven will challenge and overthrow

all normal human calculations about power and glory, all normal human calculations about what is important in life and in the world.<sup>6</sup>

A cynic: someone who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Jesus: a man who knew the value of everything and so didn't count the cost; and who challenges us to do the same.

**Sources:**

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<sup>6</sup> This sentence adapted from Wright, *Mark*, p.112