

A righteous sermon about the haves and have-nots

10 Comments

Gillian Bouras | 22 May 2016

Is there a pulpit handy? Because this unreconstructed Puritan, sick and tired of greed and fed up with poor-bashing, feels a sermon, if not a rant, coming on.



The text for today is Timothy I, chapter 6, verse 10. You know the one, much beloved of yesterday's grandmothers: it's about the love of money being the root of all evil. The verse then suggests that those who covet money pierce themselves with many sorrows.

Far be it from me to disagree with Holy Writ, but there are more than a few CEOs in this world that appear to love money to an inordinate degree, but give no sign at all of being pierced through with

sorrows. There is, of course, nothing wrong with money in itself. The real problem with money, it goes without saying, is that many, many people have not got enough of the stuff.

I'm certainly no economist, and often wonder how reliable Internet information is: it probably needs to be taken with the proverbial grain of salt, but financial facts and figures are interesting, to say the least. And while comparisons are said to be odious, they are also mind-boggling.

In America, Rex Tillerson, CEO of Exxon, received a salary of more than \$40 million in 2012. He is apparently a devout Christian, so I wonder whether he ever worries about Matthew chapter 19, verse 24. You know that one, too: it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God.

But Tillerson is just one example of the stupendously rich: the 400 richest Americans now own more wealth than the GDP of India. In contrast, vast numbers of their fellow citizens have less than \$1000 in their savings and cheque accounts combined, hardly surprising when one considers basic wages.

Federal law in the USA makes \$7.25 an hour a compulsory salary, (about \$10 in Australian currency), but the states can decide their own rates of pay, with Washington DC having the highest at \$10.50. Struggles to bring the basic wage up to \$15 have, as far as I can gather, so far failed.

Australia's basic wage is \$17.29 an hour, and the highest paid executive in the country is CSL's Brian McNamee, who is currently earning a mere \$19.11 million, while the average CEO takes home \$4.84 million, 63 times the average earnings. Less than a year ago, America's Economic Policy Institute reported that the top CEOs in the country were earning 300 times the wage of typical workers.

The riches of Greece's top earners are shrouded in mystery, usually of an off-shore type, but many pensioners are now struggling on about 400 euros a month; my two Greek-based sons have had their salaries cut three times, and are bracing themselves for another 'haircut'.

A friend comments that I am often narky in my attitude and comments. I agree, but there is such a thing as righteous indignation. And I become indignant when I read that American CEOs are earning ten times the amount they did 30 years ago. The story is probably much the same in Australia, and these high-flyers seem to walk away with the loot even if they've done a pretty bad job. The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer, and never more so than today.

Human nature does not enjoy change, and it is this tendency that American Senator Bernie Sanders, for example, is battling, as he fights against power groups who revel in the status quo. But resisting change can have dire results, as the French and Russians learned in 1789 and 1917 respectively. Far better to be a Robert Owen ((1771-1858), the Welsh-born spiritualist social reformer who established the New Lanark mill in Scotland. Owen genuinely cared for his workers, paid them properly, housed them, tried to reduce the number of their working hours, and educated their children.

Owen lived in a different world, and we cannot travel back to it. But we can still take heed of Owen's values; we can also become more aware of the effects of inequality, and the necessity to take action against it. Perhaps we can start by taking heed of a recent White House study, which concludes that action against poverty reduces crime by 3 to 5 per cent.



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