



# loretonormanhurst

***Give me the wealth that makes it possible for you to give this stone away***



*This article was first published three years ago, however, in this Easter season with its invitation to find life where life truly is, it seems to follow well from last week's reflection on that Easter question: Why look for the living among the dead?*

Anthony de Mello was a twentieth-century Indian Jesuit priest. He used stories and parables to awaken his listeners and readers to an awareness of God's presence in their midst. His stories are wonderful, thought-provoking, often utterly confronting and sometimes seemingly simple, yet always inviting the listener into a relentless search for integrity and genuine holiness. This story about the *sannyasi* (a holy person, in the Indian spiritual tradition, who has renounced worldly goods and interests to focus on the spiritual search) and the villager has much to say to us this week:

The sannyasi had reached the outskirts of the village and settled down under a tree for the night when a villager came running up to him and said, "The stone! The stone! Give me the precious stone!"

"What stone?" asked the sannyasi.

"Last night the Lord Shiva appeared to me in a dream", said the villager, "and told me that if I went to the outskirts of the village at dusk I should find a sannyasi who would give me a precious stone that would make me rich forever".

The sannyasi rummaged in his bag and pulled out a stone.

"He probably meant this one", he said, as he handed the stone over to the villager. "I found it on a forest path some days ago. You can certainly have it".

The man gazed at the stone in wonder. It was a diamond, probably the largest diamond in the whole world, for it was as large as a person's head.

He took the diamond and walked away. All night he tossed about in bed, unable to sleep. Next day at the crack of dawn he woke the sannyasi and said, "Give me the wealth that makes it possible for you to give this stone away".

There is a kind of wealth which our world prizes. It is material wealth, but it also goes beyond the accumulation of money and possessions and includes things such as power, control, fame or celebrity status as is currently the fashion, the immediate gratification of all desires, self-indulgence of all kinds, excesses of pleasure. On a less obviously tangible level it includes receiving affirmation and constant attention, popularity, admiration, the status which comes from being the trend-setter in a group or the gate-keeper in an organization, having 'our own way', constantly having our needs met, and many other such things which can be seen as bestowing identity and status. But this story is not about that kind of wealth. At the heart of Christianity there is another kind of wealth. There is a paradox in this, for poverty is the way to this wealth. The villager's energies were directed towards gaining the material wealth so prized by society, but the sannyasi had gained his wealth by emptying himself of those desires, by becoming poor in that sense. He was free from those human drives which make us want, accumulate and, in some cases, resort to any means to achieve this. On any given night the evening news will have stories which testify to the power of this drive: stories of theft, fraud, corruption, deceit, betrayal, dirty deals, lies, secrets, exploitation and abuse – there seems to be no end to what the human mind is capable of devising to satisfy these drives. But even putting aside those serious cases, we see that same drive at work in any of us in the ordinariness of our daily lives, in the seemingly small choices we make countless times in a day.

De Mello's story invites us to reflect on ourselves and observe our desires and the pattern of those desires, and observe our choices. What kind of wealth are we drawn to? And what choices are shaping us in the pursuit of that wealth? The sannyasi, of course, had to work at reaching that level of detachment from material gratification. His wealth was in that journey and in the ability he had to say 'no' to those drives.

It is a struggle we all must face if we are going to take seriously the call and the invitation to have life and have it abundantly. "I have come so that you may have life to the full", says Jesus (John 10:10). But this doesn't just happen and we need to learn how to accept this invitation. It is so easy to blame society and culture for the choices we make today. We see a materialistic society, plagued with the 'always newer and better' mentality, the pursuit of pleasures so easily accessed by those of us with the means to do so, and so on, but while the rate of change in what is available for us to consume is unprecedented, and opportunities abound in the twenty-first century, in many ways it is not that different from other ages. Excess has always been an option for those with the means to enjoy it. The real issue lies within the human heart, in the very make-up of humanity.

The 'material' things we seek in our lives are not necessarily bad in themselves. They are necessary for survival, and so have been 'programmed' into the evolution and survival of our species: taking care of our own needs, having some measure of control and power, accumulation of some degree of wealth, provision and comfort. Not to act on these desires



is to act counter-intuitively in many ways. But to give these desires, these drives, too much space in our lives will also prevent us from engaging with our very humanity on a deeper level. We need to plumb the depths of what is most 'original' to us: "in the image of God, God made humankind", the Genesis creation story proclaims, and as St Augustine says, "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You". Yet we do not go there easily! There is an inner conflict. St Paul spoke of this inner conflict in this way: the things I want to do, I do not do, and the things I don't want to do, I do. Why do we struggle so much to devote the better part of our attention to what is most authentic to our existence? In his poem, *Riddle of the World*, Alexander Pope reflects on the paradox of human existence:

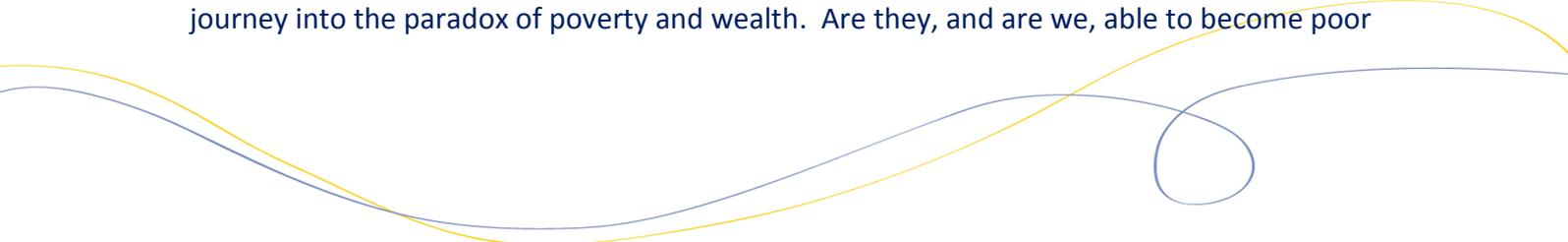
Plac'd on the isthmus of a middle state,  
a Being darkly wise and rudely great:  
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,  
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,  
He hangs between in doubt to act or rest;  
In doubt to deem himself a God or Beast;  
In doubt his mind or body to prefer;  
Born but to die and reasoning but to err;  
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,  
Whether he thinks too little or too much;  
Chaos of thought and Passion all confus'd;  
Still by himself abus'd or disabus'd;  
Created half to rise and half to fall;  
Great Lord of all things, yet a prey to all;  
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl'd;  
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

Pope powerfully presents this paradox. The question, of course, is whether that is all there is to say on the matter. Is there the possibility of embracing that restlessness Augustine speaks of and letting it lead us into something more 'original' to us? Paul speaks of being pulled this way and that by forces not of his own choosing. In past centuries people spoke of this as the 'struggle with demons', and those who took the spiritual quest seriously often left the temptations and distraction of the cities and went out into the desert to face those demons, wrestle with them, and hopefully emerge having overcome them. Jesus himself retreated to the desert where, as the story told by Matthew says, he was tempted by Satan. The writings of the early desert mothers and fathers are full of the wisdom which came from a lifetime of struggling with these temptations. In a post-Freudian world and with all we know of depth psychology and the subconscious, we know that the struggle is located in the depths of our very being where we encounter those impulses and drives. When we look at Jesus' desert experience, with all we know today, we see that those deep-seated human

drives within him were in conflict with a deeper, more original reality – that of the abundant life at the heart of our very being which cries out to be given expression. Jesus struggled with the drive for power, control, material wealth. What he shows in this struggle is that these powerful forces within are only overcome by choices in favour of something else. He chose to surrender to God, to life in all its fullness, and this is what made it possible for him to face and respond to whatever the subconscious threw up. He wrestled with it and he made a choice. The choice he made, made it possible for him to make all the other choices in his life.

What it is that makes so many people remain in that ‘middle state’, ‘half to rise and half to fall’, as Pope says, that only partly realized self? Perhaps fear. There seems to be a terrible fear of missing out on all those things that make up that wealth so prized by our societies, that wealth that holds us back from seeking the more authentic human wealth. There is the fear of not being successful, being side-lined or marginalized if one doesn’t buy into the relentless accumulation of wealth, power, pleasure, popularity. We are certainly products of our time and place and it is difficult not to judge ourselves and our lives accordingly. But then, speaking that most beautiful invitation and that mystery into our lives, are Jesus’ words: “I have come so that you may have life abundantly”.

Earlier this week I held an afternoon retreat for the fifty-four Year 12s who are Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist. It was a time to re-connect with their ministry which they took on at the end of last year and their journey into it, because this ministry is as much about, in fact even more about, who they are and how they are growing, as it is about creating and leading liturgies and distributing Holy Communion. We reflected on Jesus’ words, “You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and sent you out to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last” (John 15). When they were anointed and commissioned last year, they were asked this question: Are you willing yourselves to be the bread of life for others? So we talked about being ‘available’ to be compassionate, loving, just, forgiving, and we also considered what gets in the way. Again it was about these two kinds of wealth: the wealth which comes from popularity, power over others, pleasure, selfishness, material greed and so on, and the wealth which is compassionate, tender service of others, and all that that involves. I put these two very challenging questions to the girls: How are you making yourself available to be the bread of life and, would people know you are a Christian? I invited them to consider it in this way: are you good news for others? These are tough questions for young seventeen and eighteen year old women, just as they are for anyone. But they are crucial for young people to ask themselves at this very formative stage of their lives – their choices now do matter for it is now that they begin that life-long journey into the paradox of poverty and wealth. Are they, and are we, able to become poor



in the things that draw us away from God's life so that we can become rich in being good news in and for the world? Are we indeed good news for those we know and love and also for those we don't know, those we don't like, those in need, those whose living is impoverished in any way? Can we, like the sannyasi, choose the wealth which makes us radically available to life?

St Paul, in one of his letters to the people of Corinth, said: "You are God's temple and God's Spirit lives within you", and in another letter he reminded them that we have this treasure in earthen jars. So we are fragile, and sometimes we are unconvincing, and we don't look like good news. Would the world know we are Christian, followers of the way of Jesus? No, at times not! But we are reminded to keep returning to the promise that God's Spirit lives in us. To realise this wealth in our lives we must keep emptying ourselves of the need for that other kind of wealth which gets in the way. "Maturity, emotional and spiritual, demands that ultimately we choose love, choose service, choose prayer, and choose God, not on the basis of a feeling but on the basis of value, truth, and goodness. We are mature when love is a decision that's not based upon an emotional pay-off for us but on the intrinsic goodness that's inside the other. Maturity lies in learning how to breathe emotionally in a new way" (Ronald Rolheiser).

Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost. It's a fantastic Feast! Yes, Pentecost marks the birth of the Church, but Pentecost is all about the sannyasi's wealth, for after all, that is what the Church is, a community of people, frail, making mistakes of course, but also with wealth beyond words – the wealth which only the Spirit of God can bring. If we think back to that originating Pentecost experience we find a group of disciples, after the crucifixion, afraid that they will be arrested too and hiding in a room. Jesus appears in their midst, gives them his peace and the gift of the Holy Spirit and they are strengthened by this. Fear is turned to courage and purpose and they go out on mission, no longer cowering but alive, filled with God's Spirit and the good news of Jesus. And so they begin to transform the world. But before they could transform the world they themselves had to be transformed.

And so it is with us. Not just once but many times. In fact continually. *How* we are transformed, I believe, is through prayer. That prayer may be both personal and communal prayer and liturgy. We do liturgy so we can worship God in the world. If we are Catholic, the Eucharist is where we are nourished and made wealthy. When we celebrate the Eucharist we, together with the bread and wine, offer ourselves to God. We too are on the altar, emptied and filled, transforming the poverty of our deep-set drives into the wealth of surrender to God's Spirit. And the Mass is never ended. In Christian language we talk of becoming Christ-like, of not only being a follower of Jesus, but of being personally transformed. As Michael Morwood says in his book, *Praying a New Story*, "Jesus of Nazareth embodied this Spirit so wonderfully that he became like a mirror to us, showing us



of what we are capable when we allow this same Spirit to work freely in our lives". And as we do that and make choices for that, we will, like the sannyasi, have that wealth which makes it possible to give other wealth away.

*He gives me opportunities and the ability  
to become free and to burst through my boundaries.  
He gives the strength to be daring, to build on Him alone.*



*Ms Kerry McCullough  
Dean of Mission*

