

Carl's Contemplations on COVID and Consumerism

"Come, buy wine...without money..." Isaiah 55:1b

I once read a story about a poor family that was emigrating on an ocean liner. They had just enough money for their passage, so they packed bread and cheese to eat on the way. Halfway through the voyage the parents were terrified when their 12-year-old son came back to the berth with roast beef, potatoes, and pie. He had ventured into the dining room, and had discovered that full dining service was covered in the cost of the ticket¹. To the hungry, wandering boy or girl, God like a street vendor calls, "Hey you! Thirsty? Come and drink! Hungry? Come and eat!" While the parents fret, "How much will this cost?"

Everything has its price. Having grown up in a materialistic society we really have become "spoiled": our senses have partly gone bad, and we are led to believe that things lead to happiness. Since things cost money, the happiness that God is offering must be expensive.

And yet research shows that we are barking up the wrong tree. "Compared to those low in materialism, people who place a relatively high priority on materialistic aims report lower levels of personal well-being...relate to other people in ways characterized by Machiavellian, competitive, and prejudicial attitudes...and have less sustainable ecological attitudes and behaviors...in addition to a variety of other problematic outcomes." ². Apparently things are bad for us. But they are so hard to let go of.

The blessing of COVID is that it has really messed up our thing supply. It started with a toilet paper shortage. I still don't understand that. Perhaps people thought that COVID was going to give them diarrhea... Then the more sensible shortages of wipes, sanitizer and masks. Other things disappeared: dish soaps, foods, Diet Dr. Pepper. The latter is Marg's favourite drink, so I asked

¹ P. Kenneth Jackson, unpublished

² Brown, K. W., Kasser, T., Ryan, R. M., & Konow, J. (2015). Materialism, Spending, and Affect: An Event-Sampling Study of Marketplace Behavior and Its Affective Costs. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 17(6), 2277–2292

the supplier, who told me that factory lines were being reconfigured for social distancing. The “less popular” brands were suspended. Thankfully, Diet Dr. Pepper is now back. But we have had this experience of a lack of things. And maybe we found that we weren’t as unhappy about that as we thought we would be.

The Book of Isaiah is actually three books. Chapter 55 comes at the end of Second Isaiah, written to the exiles in Babylon. When toilet paper went missing in March, that was the first time that I had seen empty shelves in a supermarket. I had read about it happening in third-world countries or wartime situations, years and/or miles - sorry, kilometres - away from here. I discovered that I didn’t have to move to be taken into exile. Suddenly I was a stranger in a strange land. We are all exiles in 2020.

Isaiah brings Good News to exiles. We are still partnered with God. There are benefits to deprivation. What you really need is freely available. Others will envy you.

No things, no problem. Though I am glad for the return of Diet Dr. Pepper. And yet we find ways around the missing things (Zoom. Diet Coke. Really good china napkins in lieu of toilet paper...) The benefit to being a stranger in a strange land is that you get to see the world fresh again. You get to re-examine everything. The benefit to God going with you is that you get to recommit to the “things” that really matter.

A crisis is a terrible thing to waste. Enjoy this one before it ends.