

2 Samuel 11. 26 – 12. 13a

Ephesians 4. 1-6

John 6. 24-35, 40

There's an election coming! Watch out! Politicians are talking about tax. Prepare to be bewildered and for fear about our personal prosperity to be mobilised. Maybe we will even be offered a carpark we don't need.

Part of living in a society where we aspire to the *commonweal* – an old-English word – is the notion that we look out for each other and structure our society so that no one group benefits to the advantage or disadvantage of another group. Regrettably, over recent decades there has been an increasing accumulation of wealth in Australia in fewer and fewer people and a growth of poverty amongst too many. In research conducted last year by the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) they found that 3 million people are living in poverty in Australia – about 15% of the population. 731,000 of that number are children – to use the usual football measure of magnitude, that is more than seven times the MCG filled with impoverished children. And of the 3 million in poverty, 1.2 million of them are under the age of 24. The lucky country? How can this be? How did we get here? What sort of a start in life do people get from this sort of base.

This last week the Australian Labor Party made public its position on taxation for the next decade. It is a policy which is in accord with the Coalition Government's tax policy. It's not Labor's own policy. It is the Coalition's policy, that in the next twelve years there will be tax cuts which will in the main benefit the most affluent in this country. And these tax cuts will reduce government's ability to not just care for the most vulnerable but simply provide for the good ordering of our society – education, health, welfare.

How will these cuts will benefit the well off the most. In the first year of tax cuts alone, starting in 2024, 78% of the benefit will flow to the top 20% of income-earners in the country – a total of \$15.7 billion. For the 40% of Australians who earn less than \$60,000pa the tax relief will be about \$400 million per year – less than the car park rorts of the last election. This is a saving for the wealthy of about \$100 per week; and for the bottom tier of taxpayers a saving of \$68 per year. How can such a policy in all good conscience be developed and receive support from both major parties? How can such a policy be considered to be for the common good?

King David has behaved in an unconscionable way in the seduction of Bathsheba and then the murder of her husband Uriah. The prophet Nathan tells David the story of the wealthy man with numerous sheep who takes the only sheep from the poor man. While David is incensed by the inequity of this tale, it discloses his hypocrisy and his need for repentance. Which he does, like the man Ron and Mardie met on their dog walking recently.

The call of the prophets throughout the Hebrew scriptures continually remind us of the nature of God and God's preferential option for the poor. This preference of God takes very human form in this powerful story of David and Bathsheba, Uriah and Nathan.

The Church speaks of the economy of the household of God. This divine economy is structured with a preference and care for the poor. This is the constant cry of the Hebrew prophets, it was

toward the poor that Jesus' ministry was focussed and it was the concern and action of the early church.

We structure our own household budgets according to our priorities. Maybe the first of these is that we put food on the table – especially nourish our children as best we can, to heat our homes in winter and provide for our essential needs, before we consider luxuries. Too many people in Australia are now not able to do these things. Our society is becoming structured against them. This is not that they are being lazy or careless or need to work harder. The economic system has been and continues to be structured against them. At present 731,000 kids have the economic system structures against them. It is immoral that we pretend that by making some rich that their wealth will trickle down to the poor and create an equitable society. This is a lie and we have been fools to vote for it decade after decade since Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and their Australian acolytes put it out there, that this kind of economics would be good for us.

We need a word, like that of Nathan to David which will bring us to our senses and seek to set things right. A word which will lead to repentance and a return to equity and respect for all people.

We do, though, live with a tension in the church. Because we have Jesus, in today's Gospel, telling his hearers not to worry about bread to fill their bellies. But to seek the nourishment that comes from God – the food that endures to eternal life. Do we not worry about our own daily bread, though; do we turn a blind eye to those around us – too many of them hidden from sight – for whom there is not enough on the table morning and night? Do we not feel pain in these cold winter months for those who will not turn on the heaters because they cannot afford the power bills, while power utilities ship their profits offshore to lower tax jurisdictions? No, we rightly worry and do what we can. Somehow it is not enough.

The demands on all the country's welfare agencies have been growing over recent years and have become super-charged through COVID. Through this time there are wonderful stories of generosity and ingenuity as too many people have been faced with great need. The abundant generosity of the Sikh community has been heart-warming; the initiatives of restaurants and chefs for their out-of-work labour force to feed and engage them has been wonderful; the capacity of food banks to step up – especially in the outer suburbs - has been extraordinary.

But much of this has been necessary in the face of terrible policy failure and disregard for whole strata of our community. The willingness to throw the entire arts community under the bus – without any support whatsoever; the disregard for the hospitality industry, which we so-celebrate night after night on our TVs has been breathtaking. All the while that Job-keeper was paid to corporations who found themselves making greater than usual profits through COVID. To not adjust policy promptly to rectify these issues has simply been wilful arrogance and disregard for the common good. It has become clear that politics has become about power and nothing else.

We will soon be asked to cast our vote for one of the two major parties, each of them offering us incentives. Pork sausages for most; kosher sausages for the local electorate. Offering us our fill of the bread that does not endure.

While we work and pray for bread to sustain the poor in our community and country we are sustained by the one who is the bread of heaven, knowing that the heart of God is for those in need.

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