

Justice and Mercy 6, 6th October 2019: Contentment (Phil 4:8-9, Matt 11:25-30)

What's biggest problem in our society? Could be terrorism, gang violence, modern slavery, obviously what happens with Brexit high up people's lists – and of course future of planet...

One of biggest problems that's rarely talked about – **discontentment**. 1976 – Britain happiest developed nation in world. In 2015- 20th on list. We talk about the winter of discontent in 1978-9, but fact is that in 1970s as a nation on average we were noticeably happier than we are now.

The reason discontent is so destructive is not so much the thing itself, but what it causes. There is such a thing as 'holy discontent' (i.e. a divine prod for change – whether for a cause or a calling) – but in society as a whole outcomes are largely negative. Discontent is one of root causes of many of other problems we know about – massive levels of debt, crippling house prices, gambling and other addictions. But in many ways, society built on it.

Know this very well, as worked in marketing industry for 12 years. One of specialist areas was brand evaluation and ad testing. Ad industry £23.6 billion in 2018, and globally hit £1 trillion.

Founded on creating discontent. Look into history of marketing and advertising industry – can trace roots back to mid-19th century America. Increasingly industrialised society which by 1840s was producing more than was needed for first time. Decision time – either stop and see industry and business stagnate or persuade people to consume more. Opted for latter – and so consumerism and modern advertising industry was born.

And they realised was that the only way to persuade people to buy things they don't need was to create discontent, especially for things people didn't know they needed. 'Look at what you could have.' And then when you've been persuaded to need something you didn't – and the only things we actually need as humans are food, water, a few items of clothing, shelter, and a few tools – then the next step is to upgrade more quickly than you need to, or maybe to own more than one, or ten or 50 of the same thing.

- First phase of ad industry very obvious – describe benefits. Wordy ads fronted by paragons of health and authority.
- But as markets got more crowded it became more about comparison – Mrs So-and-so has it, so if you don't you're missing out. And here lies the seeds of what became modern branding. Because that idea of wanting to emulate a certain sort of person has morphed into something far more sophisticated – brands now are about selling not just a lifestyle, but an identity. If you want to be this kind of person, you need to own this kind of product.
- And the truth is that most people are far more influenced by it than they admit. My family loves 'Shop well for less' – EXPAND – unmasks people's addiction to brands. But I could open most of your cupboards and see similar things. I know because I used to test stuff like this for 12 years and track sales etc and even the people who say they're not influenced are.

And the point is that the whole thing is founded on creating discontent, which generates a desire for consumption. Which is why in our series on justice and just living I've given a whole week

to what seems like an unrelated topic – that of discontent. Because if we are to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God, **one of the most powerful life changes at our disposal is the radical appeal of a contented life.** A contented life consumes less, wastes less, is therefore more productive, and also more just, more merciful. It's a win all round.

But how to get it? Paul knows – 'secret'. But it's an open secret and one that can be learned. And that is to trust in a God who provides – 'I've been rich, I've been poor' but through it all, 'I can do all things through him who gives me strength.'

We often quote this passage as one about achievement, and it's not wrong to do that – but this is really a passage about contentment. *Whatever circumstances you find in life, we can trust in a good God who provides and will see us through.* Jesus saying something similar when he says that what he offers is rest for our souls, because his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Trust me, stop burdening yourself with a life borne of discontent and rest. I am enough, Jesus says, I am enough.

Isn't that liberating? And whilst this secret is something we can all learn and receive as a gift, we can also help ourselves with a bit of training – two other tips:

Focus on the good – vv8-9 – not escape reality, but we *can* see the glass of our life as half full and not half empty. Another way of putting vv8-9 would be 'don't feed your discontent.' We can't avoid marketing messages, but we can choose to ignore them. To find our security, our identity, in God and in what He thinks of us and not society.

Think about others – v10. Paul commends the young church for their concern for him – and it's often true that caring for others puts our own lives in perspective. We learn to be more grateful for what we have. In our busy lives, make sure there's enough time to think about others – it will bless them and bless us too.

Great passage for a baptism service because this is the world Charlie is growing up in – our society will train him to be discontented from a young age, and we can't avoid that. But today in his baptism we affirmed a different identity and future for him – as a beloved child of God, who has a good heavenly Father who will provide for him. My prayer for Simon and Tracey, as it is for myself and for all of us, is that we would know this reality, and lead lives of radical contentment. There is no more just, merciful or better way to live. Amen.

As we celebrate hosting our exhibition this weekend, surrounded by the amazing work of hundreds of school-children, I think this topic is a timely reminder. The excess we see in our world, and the waste, is often fuelled by discontentment. I thank God that a new generation is growing up with a far greater understanding of or effect on the planet than my own generation did. There is hope when I see that. In a discontented world, today we want to affirm a different identity and future for all of us – we are beloved children of God, who have a good heavenly Father who will provide for us. My prayer is that our schools, our community, and of course all of us would know this reality, and lead lives of radical contentment. There is no more just, merciful or better way to live. Amen.