

NOTES ON RADICAL LIVING

*From the evening led by Julia Sharp
on 16th November 2017
held at 3 Counties Church*

*“Prayer does not use up any artificial energy,
doesn’t burn up any fossil fuel,
doesn’t pollute.
Neither does song,
neither does love,
neither does the dance.”*

Margaret Mead, anthropologist

*The question for us to wrestle with is this:
How far does one function well as – and
indeed how far should one even be – a
consumer when one’s primary identity is
as a follower of Jesus Christ?*

Ruth Valerio, Just Living

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RADICAL CONTENTMENT

To begin with, I hope you are not reading this booklet looking for answers! Realistically it should generate more questions than answers; perhaps some of the questions you will be able to answer yourselves, and perhaps just realising that there IS a question will be beneficial in its own right.

The concept of radical living is huge, woolly, and probably different for each one of us. My perception of radical living doesn't involve heading anywhere, but of staying right here and living differently for God where He has put me. A verse that I have always found hugely important and challenging is Romans 12 v 2: "Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God – what is good and is pleasing to Him and is perfect." Living for God should involve His transforming power at work in us so that we are aligned with His standards and His will – fundamentally, that is radical.

It is difficult, though, to know in some situations whether or not we are still being "conformed to this world's standards". The world has very many standards, and it's much easier to consciously identify some of them than others. I expect that the majority of us could agree that we do not wish to conform to worldly standards where these standards espouse religious persecution, or child pornography. But some worldly standards are much more difficult to identify as they are embedded in our culture, and therefore also into our churches – we don't actually even recognise them as standards of the world that we should not be conformed to. I would like to contend that one such standard is that of consumerism. I'd like to challenge us about our attitudes towards consumerism and try to encourage us to think about whether there are things in our lives that we might choose to do differently.

I have based a lot of this material on Ruth Valerio's book, *Just Living*. The book is based on her doctoral thesis and aims to cover the context, theology and practice of living well as a Christian in today's globalised, consumer society. I would really recommend it if you want to look further at some of these issues; at times it goes into quite a bit of depth which can feel daunting, but it's also really satisfying to be able to get your teeth into some of the thinking behind what we can actually do.

What is consumerism? There are a range of definitions, which tend to centre on the following:

1. The promotion of the consumer's interests
2. The theory that an increasing consumption of goods is economically desirable; *also*: a preoccupation with and an inclination toward the buying of consumer goods

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

Philippians 4 v 12

To think and pray about:

Contentment is active, a decision rather than a feeling. Below, write down one or more areas of your life that you are going to choose to be content in this week.

RADICAL ATTITUDE TO MONEY

Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can, but not at the cost of conscience.

John Wesley

Perhaps it would be right to accompany (the above) with an additional principle that money and things should also never be kept at the expense of other people or the wider creation.

Ruth Valerio, Just Living

To think about and discuss:

What do you think about the two quotations? Do you agree with one or both of them? If so, why? If not, why not?

Do you think there is a 'Christian' attitude towards money?

Sometimes we can feel that if we tithe regularly we are giving God our money – but God cares about what we do with the 90% we keep! How can we put ALL of our money into God's hands?

Do you view financial success as a sign of God's favour?

How are you personally blessing others through money?

We are all consumers in the most basic sense of the word, when we go to Tesco for a pint of milk or a loaf of bread. When, however, does this simple act of shopping become "consumerist"? Here are some more questions to complicate the matter: Do we need the milk and bread, or are we unlikely to use it in time and end up throwing it away? Have we chosen the products because of their price or their quality? And what defines their quality – are we keen to buy organic milk because we are thinking about animal welfare standards, or wholemeal bread for its taste, or for its brand? Are we planning to give visitors these products and communicate something about ourselves through our choices? Where did the products come from, anyway, and how did they get here? Who are the producers and have they been paid a fair price for what they have made?

Although we usually think of consumerism in terms of material things (stuff), we also may apply it to any situation where we are looking at what we can gain. Examples can include our work, our relationships, how we spend our time, our church. If such complex issues can exist over something as basic as milk and bread, just begin to think about what can come out of our relationship to our larger bits of "stuff", such as our house or car, or to our money, or to less tangible aspects of life such as our work, our friendships, our church, our family? What about our attitude towards the natural world? If consumerist attitudes can permeate all aspects of our lives, then all aspects of our lives should be examined under the microscope to see how we can ask God's transforming power to intervene where we are consciously or unconsciously conforming to the world's standards.

During the evening, I set up a number of 'stations', each of which contained different things to do to challenge us about how God might be calling us to live more radically for Him. I have reproduced these here. Each has a title and a quotation from somewhere. Some of these stations have questions for personal prayer and contemplation; others have ideas for a discussion that you might want to share with someone else. You may find it helpful to use these in your own time.

When we start to look at how we may be acting as part of a consumerist society, there may be a number of facets that we feel challenged by. Perhaps our purchasing habits, or how we use our money, or our expectations of relationships, or of church, or of how we are relating to the wider world. Many of these may overlap. As a follower of Jesus Christ, we are called to be transformed, not conformed, and this is where I believe we can live radical lives.

RADICAL RELATIONSHIPS

“If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?”

Matthew 5 v 46-47

To think and pray about:

Do you need to stop looking at what you can gain from a relationship or relationships?

Is God calling you to act radically in a particular relationship; either an existing relationship or a new one?

Is there anyone you need to forgive, or to ask forgiveness from?

What relationships do you need to give more to? In terms of time? Or practical help? Or to give more of yourself?

Are there relationships that you are reluctant to form because you fear that you will not gain anything from them?

RADICAL TRUST

“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”

Matthew 6 v 26

To think and pray about:

Consider how much you are tempted to ‘store away in barns’ rather than trust God. This could be in terms of money, or possessions, or relationships – wherever we are relying on ourselves to meet our needs rather than trust God to meet them. Bring these areas to God and rededicate them to Him.

If you would find it helpful, write down these areas below

RADICAL SACRIFICE

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

Luke 21 v 3-4

To think and pray about:

Are we prepared to make personal sacrifices in order to live a life that is less dominated by consumerism?

- So I am less distracted from God by consumerism and stuff
- So my life is more just and merciful

What sort of choices could we make?

A smaller house?

Not replacing our car? Not having a car? Spending more on a less polluting car?

Buying second hand rather than new?

Not taking foreign holidays, or taking fewer holidays?

Not updating our phone/TV/games console/car/....

Not choosing the savings account or investment with the best return?

Not engaging in celebrity culture? Or ‘keeping up with the Joneses’?

Add any areas that challenge you

RADICAL GENEROSITY

All things come from you, and of your own do we give you.

Church of England ASB

To think and pray about:

Are we giving everything of ours to God to use?

Our money?

Our time?

Our house?

Our car?

Our possessions?

Our skills and talents?

Is God asking you to give more to Him?

Below, write down something you can give to God that you might not have thought of:

Ultimate generosity is personified through God’s grace, in giving us Jesus

RADICAL (LACK OF) CONSUMERISM

If one of the key cultural traits of consumerism is that it detaches us – from other people, from God, from the wider natural world, from ourselves – then the most effective means of questioning that trait is actively to engage in ways of forming lines of reconnection.

Ruth Valerio, Just Living

To think about and discuss:

As consumers, how can we ensure that what we purchase benefits the producers?

How can we ‘reduce the distance’ between ourselves as consumers and the producers of whatever we are buying?

How can we use our purchasing power to influence businesses such as supermarkets?

Is there a distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ spending?

Christmas is coming – often a time of considerable consumption. What practical steps could you take to do things differently this Christmas?

RADICAL JUSTICE

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6 v 8

To think about and discuss:

Who or what suffers injustice as a result of thoughtless and excessive consumerism?

How is environmental breakdown a form of injustice?

How can we use our resources and the choices we make to bring about justice? (E.g. in how we spend our money)

Is campaigning the only answer?

What personal sacrifices should we be prepared to make in the cause of greater justice for all?