

## Mark 4:1-20 (Isaiah 55:6-13) – Consumer Detox wk 1 ‘Thorns’ (9<sup>th</sup> March 2014)

Start of new sermon series for Lent: Consumer Detox. Based on book about we live as Christians in a consumer society. Sun teaching and then groups in week. Lou’s description:

*40 days to let God expose destructive patterns in our lives and breathe freedom in their place. The Lent Consumer Detox is an invitation to less stuff and more life as we go on a journey of greater freedom from the temptations and trappings of our consumer culture.*

*For 5 weeks of Lent 2014 our small groups will follow up on the reading and topic of the Sunday morning sermon series and be asked to do something practical: to make something, find something out, try something, give something, and so on. Trust will be needed. And a willingness to take risks. If we are willing to go on the journey, God can do amazing things through us, this Lent and beyond.*

Exciting stuff – challenging too. Start with phrase ‘less stuff and more life’ – catchy, but an oxymoron in our culture. How does less stuff = more life. Central pillar of our society’s values: more stuff = more life. How does less stuff lead to more life?

Come on to passage in a minute – start by addressing first question. How did we get to this point in first place? How did we all become consumers? What is a consumer anyway?

Idea started in 1840s USA – technology leading to overproduction. Choice: limit technology and damage economy/growth, or stimulate demand so people bought more stuff. Opted for latter and modern advertising was born. Fuelled dominance of defining society in economic terms.

Only part of story. 20<sup>th</sup> century consumerism built on those foundations - ideology. Marketing one thing, but consumerism more than that. READ Benton p11-12. Promise of happiness and power of personal choice. Ultimately it is an ideology where we define ourselves by what we own. Reverse of traditional values: station in life shaped your ‘stuff’. Now you create your own identity by what you buy.

Compare with original word: citizen. Dates back to ancient Greece: member of city-state. Different relationship to society: implied or assumed membership of political assembly. Engaged with society and community. But consumer is different. We *consume*. It’s an economic, me-focused relationship, implying no further responsibilities to state and civil society other than that we buy stuff.

Affects every sphere of understanding: the world of citizenship is the world of education, of ideas and responsibilities. The world of consumerism is business and marketing.

e.g. of riots: what did young people riot about? 30 years ago: inequality, racism – language of citizenship. Violent, yes – but at least it was about principles of justice and equality.

What about 2011? Started as outpouring of anger at shooting of unarmed man. But what happened when spread? It wasn’t about justice or inequality anymore, it was about stuff. People

didn't storm the council offices, they broke into shops and stole trainers and TVs. *Nothing highlights more clearly the grip that consumerist ideology has on society than the aspirations of our young people.* What do many of them aspire to? More stuff. In some ways what was most terrifying about the riots was this fact: for 90% there was no battle for rights and justice or any form of principle. It was a chance to break into JD Sports and Dixons to get a new pair of Nikes and a widescreen telly.

This is where we live. Spent more than half of time on this because we need to get a handle on just how dominant this thinking is in our society. And we like to think it doesn't affect us: but try moving and see how much stuff you got. We've just done it: fortunately fitted into 'only' one lorry! BUT entire 32 tonne lorry to fit in our stuff. This is who we are. Thrift is out. Stuff is in.

**Come to Mark 4** – famous parable. So much to say, pick out headlines.

**Word of God is inherently fruitful.** Message of Isaiah 55: does not return empty but achieves purpose. Note idea of growing (READ v10-11). Jesus picks up on this. If seed falls in good soil, it produces an extraordinary crop: 30, 60, 100. Encouraging. We are not in this battle on our own: God's word has power to shape and define our lives, and for those who allow it to, it produces abundant fruit.

Second, **many people respond positively to gospel.** Jesus describes 4 types of responses but only 1 rejects the message. The other 3 embrace it. We worry about new atheism (old-fashioned pride), and they are the seed on the path. But many people are still open to the gospel, this is only one type of outcome.

But the challenge of course is that of the 3 types of seed that begin their growth, **only one pushes on to real fruitfulness.** One type of seed starts well and then gives up. Not focus for today, but I think there's a rough order in Jesus' words. This type of enthusiasm followed by a walking away when going gets hard tends to define a young Christian. In journey of faith we often face these challenges young: ridiculing from our mates at school, the decision to choose a godly lifestyle at uni when the pressure is to conform otherwise. These are the shallow soil challenges and they hit hardest on those young in faith. And by God's grace many of us survive them, but that leads us into the next challenge, which is the focus of today: the thorns.

All the figures will show you that most people who are Christians when they are 30 stay Christians for the rest of their lives. But that's not the whole story: because there are fruitful Christians and unfruitful ones. What makes the difference between the two? Well, lots of things, probably, but in this parable Jesus gives us one very clear pointer: it's the thorns of life which choke our faith. And what are these thorns?

Worries of life, deceitfulness of wealth and desires for other things. *We don't give up, we get distracted.* Faith gets crowded out by pressures of life, or by a creeping desire for financial success, or by some other desire. Maybe a mid-life crisis of masculinity when we stop going to

church to pursue some leisure activity, maybe an all-consuming ambition for our children which takes over our lives.

Often there's no one defining issue: it's just all that stuff that gets in the way. But note how Jesus describes wealth: deceitful. It makes promises it can't keep. Promises ease and security and delivers the opposite. My own e.g. (EXPAND) – having money takes a lot of work.

Money lies to us. We need enough, but our culture tells us we need as much as possible. Hardest issue is providing for our family, esp children. Quote scripture about being worse than unbelievers – misquote, letting people starve. So often our desire for wealth is driven by giving our kids most financially secure start possible. Mixed blessing. Do children ever learn value of money if always have too much of it? How we teach about faith when never have to exercise it? Difficult questions – beware using that idea to justify hoarding. Deep down right motives, but outcome could be reverse of what we intend it to be.

**How deal with it?** Only one way to deal with thorns: rip them out. Always grow quicker than the crop and tend to thrive in most soils. Need to be uprooted. 2 thoughts as I close:

**Name them:** often retain a grip because we don't admit to ourselves what it is that is choking our lives. Self-awareness and self-honesty are huge factors in spiritual growth. Name your thorns – to yourself and to your family if that would be helpful.

**Change one thing.** Don't be over-ambitious. This area often paralyses us. Accept that this is the world we live in, but make a start on subverting it. Just aim for one thing, one gain, one way of saying to the thorns: you're not going to keep choking me. And pray. The devil loves this stuff. You can guarantee it won't be an easy win. And take heart from that: if it's hard, you know that the devil really doesn't want you to do it, so you're on the right road. Counter-intuitive thinking, but this stuff is a battle: thorns aren't there to live happily alongside you, their aim is to cannibalise all the soil's nutrients and choke you.

So as we begin this Lent series, let's recognise the world we live in for what it is. Definitions matter: are you a consumer, or a citizen, or even better a child of the living God?

And let's name our thorns, let's get them out there, let's be open with ourselves.

And let's choose the path to freedom, to less stuff and more life, to more fruitfulness. May God grant us the grace to produce a crop: 30, 60 or even 100 times what was sown. Amen.