

Noxious 'thoughts' 3 - Avarice

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In accord with the tenor of Lent, we've been reflecting on what it means to heed Jesus' call to 'repent and believe the good news'. Repentance begins, as the word *metanoia* suggests with a change of mind (*meta* = change; *nous* = mind), but what actually needs changing? Well, we've been exploring this question in conversation with the fourth century desert monk Evagrius Ponticus. Evagrius discerned eight common patterns of thinking or thoughts (*logismoi*), that undermine life by alienating us from ourselves, from one another, and from God.

Two weeks ago, we looked at the first of these thoughts – *gastromargia* or gluttony. Last week it was *porneia* – lust. And today, ripping along, it's *philarguria*, avarice; not a word we use terribly often. So, what is it? Literally speaking, *philarguria* means 'love of silver', and mostly it's equated with 'greed'. More commonly these days we'd say 'love of money' as in that famous verse, 'The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil' (1 Timothy 6.10).

Philarguria points to a person who is obsessed with money such that they'll do almost anything to get *and keep* it, including bending the rules, praying on the fortune of others, even deceiving or betraying a family member. The avaricious person is greedy and also miserly. As a caricature, think of the embittered hoarder, Ebenezer Scrooge, from Dicken's novel *A Christmas Carol* – thin, humourless, mean-spirited, begrudging – loaded and miserable. And if Scrooge seems too far-fetched, think of the landlord who exacts a high rent for his run-down property but who never fixes anything; or the builder who cuts corners on quality to make a quick buck; or the employer who exploits migrant workers; or the billionaire who avoids tax by stashing money in off-shore accounts; the loan shark who preys on the financially

vulnerable with easy loans at exorbitant rates; or the sibling who through sly scheming diddles a brother or sister out of a share in an inheritance. I could go on but this gives us a sense of what avarice is and of how rife and damaging it is in the world.

These figures provoke scorn and cynicism – it's easy to point the finger and be outraged. And yet, as with his treatment of gluttony and lust, Evagrius doesn't treat avarice as merely something 'out there' – as a caricature of someone who's not us! Rather, he sees a connection with anxieties we all struggle with to some degree; worries about our future, for example. Evagrius writes: *Philaguria* 'suggests to the mind a long old age, and the inevitable inability to earn one's keep with one's hands' ... 'there will be famines, illnesses will visit us, and the bitterness of poverty, and with all that the terrible shame of having to accept the necessities of life from others'. Age, infirmity, loss of income through retirement, the cost of care, the prospect of dependence – ring any bells?! 'These anxieties provide the soil in which avarice grows' (Angela Tilby).

In his parable of the rich fool, Jesus brilliantly evokes some of these dynamics. He tells this story in response to someone in the crowd making a bitter request: '*Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me*' (Lk 12.13). Avarice it seems is already at work here, but Jesus refuses to engage directly in the dispute. Instead he invites them to imagine a rich man, contemplating what to do with his most recent bumper crop. And notice the pattern of thinking here. It says in the parable, *He began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do: I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry".'*

There's no consideration of gratitude or sharing, it's all about him and his future security. He grasps all he can get and keeps it all for himself. Jesus calls him a fool. And the foolishness starts in his head, with his thoughts. And maybe that's what Jesus is trying to help the disgruntled brother, the crowd, all of us, to see.

Later spiritual writers tend to speak of avarice simply as a behavioural vice (deadly sin) without acknowledging the underlying emotional roots that provoke this insecure behaviour, the thought of scarcity and vulnerability that feeds the compulsion to grasp and hoard, that tempts us to stockpile silver and gold, shares, properties, cars, companies, jewels, artwork, even toilet paper. Remember those scenes – people fighting over the last rolls in the shop? That's what avarice does; it makes us mean and selfish; creates shortage; causes division; ruptures community. Think of the damage avarice causes to the distribution of wealth, to the environment – the fabric of our common life.

And it gets even subtler than this. Avarice is about hoarding material wealth, but there are other ways in which we can withhold, be miserly, refuse to share. We can withhold ourselves, for example, refuse to offer praise or encouragement, be ungenerous in our words, with our time, in our attitudes. Maybe the underlying fear is of being overwhelmed, found wanting or of losing what we have, so in order to protect and secure ourselves we 'keep ourselves to ourselves' as the saying goes (and isn't that revealing?).

Which brings us to the question of what it means to repent of avarice, to be liberated from meanness of mind and spirit, and the fear-based grasping and withholding that inevitably goes with it. To begin, as with the other 'thoughts', there is the practice of awareness and letting be. As the fear of not being or having enough arises we acknowledge and relinquish it. This

desire to feel safe and have enough is not bad. It becomes problematic though when we indulge the anxiety, when it drives us compulsively to seek to secure ourselves – which, in the end, we cannot do. The rich man built his bigger barns, had more than enough; it gave him the illusion of permanence but did nothing to secure his life. We can make provision for the future, seek to be responsible and wise, but ultimately, we must entrust ourselves to God if we are to have any freedom and joy. Acknowledging the anxiety and then letting it go, leaving it with God, is the way to change our mind, to repent. Remember, ‘prayer is the laying aside of thoughts’ (Evagrius).

Alongside this foundational practice, it also helps to practice contentment, gratitude and generosity. Contentment is being happy with and without; it’s living in the present moment without wishing things to be other than they are. ‘When you are discontent, you always want more, more, more’, the Dalai Lama has said. ‘Your desire can never be satisfied. But when you practice contentment, you can say to yourself, ‘Oh yes, I already have everything that I really need.’” It’s not the same as passive resignation and neither is it grim determination not to let circumstances get the best of you. It’s a state of fulfilment that comes as we practice saying and trusting: ‘It is enough, I am enough, we are enough, God is enough...’

Gratitude is thankfulness, appreciation. Most of us have moments when we feel this quite spontaneously and we can practice it by more deliberately noticing and giving thanks for good things in our lives. Mostly we take these things for granted, until they’re taken away. The practice of gratitude makes us more conscious of and grateful for the goodness of life, it feeds contentment, lifts our mood and enjoyment of life, helps us feel closer to family and friends, improves physical health and resilience to cope with tougher times.

And finally, a third means of breaking free from the compulsion to cling and withhold is the practice of generosity – of giving without strings. As we practice of generosity, we begin to understand where we are closed and tempted to hold back, where we feel our fear. There's something very powerful about giving away money, but it's not limited to the giving of material things. We can be generous with our kindness, listen generously, speak generously, act generously. And we can be generous with our availability for life. Paradoxically, being willing to receive something from another can also be a form of generosity, and an antidote to avarice.