

*Commodification and grace*

Far up on the North coast of Scotland, just beyond the granite city of Aberdeen where I once ministered and looking out over the wild North Sea, there lies the small village of Balmedie. Balmedie is no longer quite what it once was. The coming of the oil industry to the North East of Scotland in the 1970s has meant a glut of modern houses alongside traditional farmhouses and fishing cottages, and Balmedie's quiet country road has become a major thoroughfare in and out of Aberdeen. The village's most impressive feature remained unchanged however, and that is its long and splendid beach and its colossal sand dunes, the fifth largest sand dune system in Britain. Designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest, the dunes of Balmedie are a substantial area of stable grassland, supporting a large array of wildlife. For all the impact of oil, this wild and often windswept stretch of coast remained one of the treasures of the region.

Until, that is, 10 years ago, when enter one Donald Trump, also known as 'The Donald', American billionaire entrepreneur and developer and now presumptive republican candidate in the US Presidential election. Trump, whose grandmother was Scottish, looked at Balmedie with his billionaire businessman eyes and this is what he saw – he saw a multi-million pound golf complex with two golf courses, a 450 bedroom hotel, 950 holiday homes, 36 luxury golf villas, 500 private residences, an elite golf academy and a driving range. Mr Trump is no Mr. Second Best. His plan is for this to be the greatest golf complex in the world, hosting Open Championships and the Ryder Cup.

There is however just one problem, apart from the weather which is not exactly Florida. The name of that problem is Mr Mike Forbes. Mr Forbes owns 23 acres of land - right bang in the middle of the proposed development – with geese, hens, cats, bits of old tractor, a derelict car and burnt out barrels scattered around his farm cottage. Mr Trump wants him out and Mr Forbes is refusing to sell. While debate has raged over the proposed development with many locals with an eye for a profit fully in favour, Mr Forbes is unmoved and unmoveable. Trump has offered Mr Forbes big sums of money to get him off the land but Forbes has refused. He insists that he is not budging from where he has lived all his life and his father and grandfather before him. The local newspaper wondered what would happen if Trump offered, say, £10m? Mr Forbes' reply is not repeatable in church, but he did go on to say that Trump

‘thought we were all a load of cabbages up here and he could just sweep through and clear up... He's not used to people saying no to him.’

Well, mention of cabbages brings us to a similar scenario that we encountered in our reading from 1 Kings 21 this morning, and a reminder that nothing ever changes. Replace Donald Trump with King Ahab, someone else not used to people saying ‘no’ to him; replace Mike Forbes with Naboth; replace 23 acres of geese, cats and various bits of rusty debris with a vineyard, and replace a golf complex with a load of cabbages and a vegetable garden and the two situations bear close resemblance. And if up in Aberdeen there are voices supportive of Mr Trump, so also we might have some sympathies with King Ahab. After all, King Ahab’s proposal seems not unreasonable. It’s not as if he’s trying to cheat Naboth out of his vineyard. Listen again: ‘I shall give you a better vineyard in exchange for it or, if you prefer, I shall give you its value in silver.’ Well, that’s fair enough, isn’t it? What has Naboth got to complain about? He could actually better himself here, could he not? Is it not Naboth who is being unreasonable?

Well, the answer is no. Naboth is not being unreasonable and Ahab should have known better. The key to everything lies in Naboth’s initial reply to Ahab, ‘The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.’ It sounds a bit like Mike Forbes’ insistence that this is where his father lived and his grandfather before him. But it’s more than that. Naboth here is talking about his inheritance which he has received and which he must pass on for it is not his to do with as he likes. You see, in ancient Israel land first and foremost belonged to God. ‘The earth is the Lord’s and everything is it’, says the psalmist. And God’s land had been lent out, apportioned between the tribes and families of God’s people Israel, to be passed on from one generation to the next. And that meant that land was not a commodity – it was an inheritance. In fact according to the law land could be sold in extremity, if a family was destitute. But every 50 years it was to revert to its original owners. So land could not be sold permanently, and that was a measure designed to prevent the accumulation of land by the rich and the disinheritance of the poor. It was a mechanism calibrated to prevent extremes of wealth and poverty. Only Ahab cannot see this. He’s forgotten it. Maybe he has been blinded by his power. Maybe he’s come under the influence of his wife Jezebel who worships a different god that knows nothing of the radical practices of Israel’s God. But he

is treating something that belongs to God, something that is loaned conditionally, as a commodity to be bartered and sold and stock-piled.

Well, this might be a good moment to become Marxists for a while and engage in a little Marxist critique of capitalism. Part of Karl Marx's analysis of capitalism included what has since been called 'commodification', and basically commodification is what happens when commercial or economic value is assigned to something that was not previously considered in those terms. In other words, very simply, it is the transformation of something into a commodity with a price tag on it. An extreme example would be slavery. Think of what happens in slavery. A human being is torn away from their family, their parents, their spouse, their children – they are torn out of the whole web of relationships that makes them who they are, and they are turned into an object with a price tag to be used by others. And to treat a human being that way is a violation of who they are, their fundamental identity. Commodification also lies at the heart of prostitution, where sex becomes a product to be bought and sold, and indeed we increasingly witness today a wider commodification of sex as it is abstracted from relationships of love and intimacy and respect and turned into a means of satisfying a need and making a profit – exactly the nature of a commodity. And Marx would have said that capitalism thrives on turning everything into a commodity in a kind of ruthless prostitution. And that is why some people object to a beautiful stretch of wild coastland being developed into a billion pound golf complex, transforming the delicate web of a wild life habitat into a financial bonanza, a playground for the rich. And the result of commodification, in the wise words of Oscar Wilde, is that we know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

It was this that was the issue at the heart of Ahab's proposal and Naboth's refusal. To the Israelite land represented a complex web of relationships – relationships with God who owned it, with ancestors who had it on loan, with descendants who would inherit it, and with what was grown on it, be it vegetable or grapes. And Ahab wanted to rip it out of that network of meaning and to redefine it as a commodity.

One detail here is interesting. Ahab wanted to turn Naboth's vineyard into a vegetable garden. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, Egypt is referred to as a vegetable garden - while Israel is described as a vineyard. In other words you have a choice between Egypt's vegetable garden and Israel's vineyard. You have a choice between Egypt – which is a symbol in the Old Testament for

slavery and oppression and exploitation, where the Israelites became brick-producing builders of Pharaoh's multi-billion pound golf complexes; or you have Israel – the object of God's grace, lovingly planted and tended. It is a choice between slavery and grace, for the whole commodification mind-set is one that is one that runs counter to the ethos of grace. Commodification and grace are at opposite poles. Commodification looks at the world and sees it as something to be grasped, something to be torn out of its natural balance and relatedness, something to be exploited for profit. And grace sees the world as gift, as something to be treasured in its wondrous connectedness, as something to be received gratefully. And it is the world as gift of grace rather than the world as object of commodification that we must rediscover.

You know, at present, with the crisis over global warming there is much talk of cutting down our dependence on fossil fuels. And we certainly need to do that. But there is a deeper need, because changing our energy choices is not enough. What we need is a deeper shift in the whole way we view the world, indeed the whole way we view life. The commodification tendency is strong and it lies behind our insane appetite for oil, but it will continue to poison the planet irrespective of what form of energy we use. It will continue to infect our choices and lead to oppression and exploitation. It is Egypt that must be countered. It is the commodified vegetable garden that must be resisted and subverted by the vineyard of grace.

How do we begin to do that? Well, it's a massive task. But as Christians we have something to contribute, for as Christians we understand the issues and as Christians we have these ancient narratives to draw on that portray so powerfully what is at stake. As Christians we know all about Egypt and its ways. And as Christians we are well versed in the language of grace and we know something of how it works.

Let me indicate a starting point – just a beginning. Let me suggest that we learn to resist commodification by investing in things that come without a price tag. I wish this afternoon I could take a walk along unspoilt Balmedie beach, and I would climb up on the dunes and run down them, and I'd take my shoes off and wade in the water and I'd gaze out to sea and shout to the wind, 'Mr Trump, it doesn't get any better than this!' And as I can't get to Balmedie I might have to make do with the Vondelpark instead. And that might inspire me to invest more in the relationships that go to make up who I am, to invest in

precious time with family and with friends and the things that feed the soul – to rediscover the things that have value and worth but are price-less.

For there is where we meet grace. There is where we receive God's gifts. There is we learn to experience the world differently, and so to live differently. And therein lies our salvation. Amen.