

Resources for Churches...

Responding to the Coronavirus

For Where Your Treasure Is

One of the things we have been thinking about as a church during this time of pandemic has been how to care for our minds and our souls. We have thought about some of the things that can help this – going for walks, keeping in touch with other people, doing things which you enjoy, being kind to others and living in the present moment. Another thing we could add to this list is living simply. Some of us have already noticed in lockdown that we have needed less and haven't missed some of the things which formerly were important to us. Others of us have already taken the opportunity to have a clear-out and noticed that we feel much better as a result; that there is something freeing and joy-giving in order and space. If, as seems likely, we have another period of lockdown over the winter months, we will benefit from our homes being places of light and freedom rather than darkness and imprisonment. So now is a good time to prepare. But why is decluttering good for our minds and souls?



In Acts 4:37 we read that Barnabas sold a field and gave the money raised for apostles to use to help those in need. While I am not suggesting that this was a decluttering exercise, it nevertheless has something to say about not keeping what we have to ourselves and using our possessions to benefit others. This in turn helps us feel better. But there is more to it than this. Experts tell us that it is a recognised phenomenon that surrounding ourselves with unnecessary possessions and living with clutter increases our stress and anxiety levels. Our minds cannot fully focus nor relax because the disorder signals to our brain that there is work still to be done. Our things can actually drain life and joy out of us rather than enhancing them.

In his teaching about how we are to live the full and free life of God's kingdom, Jesus also points out the danger of surrounding ourselves with unnecessary stuff. 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' (Matt 6:19-21) The things we keep around us reflect what we give value to, what are important and precious to us. Jesus' concern is that our hearts are focussed on the things that are of lasting, not temporary, worth.

So it looks as if decluttering can be sacred, God-centred work. We have a God who brought order out of chaos but sometimes we can find ourselves doing the opposite, maybe without even realising! Of course, we all keep things for reasons - but sometimes the reasons we had for keeping them are no longer applicable, and sometimes these reasons don't help us to live well or be the best we can be. Having a sort out is an activity that keeps us in the present moment rather than worrying over our fears for the future or dwelling on past events. In the midst of so much that we cannot control, tackling the issue of our accumulated belongings, over which we can have influence, focusses our minds on something healthy and positive and keeps our minds in the here and now.

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What we need changes over time. Life has its stages, and sometimes we keep things because we want to keep around us things that tie us to a former stage. Holding on to our children's old toys reminds me of happy times, times that I sometimes feel sad are behind me. I can convince myself that they will be useful for visitors or future grandchildren, but if all they are doing is filling our cupboards and decreasing our floor space then they are not life giving but life draining. But sometimes we hang on to things for less happy reasons. We keep things because we're worried that we might need them one day, and by keeping them we can manage our fear of the unknown. Or when we have suffered trauma or loss, we can surround ourselves with things that tie us to happier times. Whether it be the death of someone close to us, the loss of a home or a job, a broken relationship, or simply through having had a deprived childhood, we can develop a subconscious urge to fill the hurt with collecting and keeping things. Slowly and subtly, we can begin to find our hope and comfort not in Jesus and the ways of God's kingdom, but in worldly goods. And the result is that, rather than help us and make life better, we can find ourselves feeling trapped, restless and anxious. Our possessions begin to dictate the way we live, whether we can move around easily and safely, find things, have clear surfaces on which to eat and sit, and whether our rooms are light or dark, etc.

If the thought of having a clear-out fills us with a sense of dread rather than joy, it will help if we work out why and ask God's help in facing what it shows us. Coming to terms with the past can be painful. We need to accept who we are now – whether that be less active so no longer in need of old tennis racquets, or a different shape so in no need of ill-fitting clothes. And we also need to recognise when we are hanging on to things out of guilt - because of who gave it us, because of how much it cost, or because it was a gift. If we don't need it or want it then it does not help us by hanging on to it. Sorting will be easier if we do it in manageable chunks, so we don't feel overwhelmed - a cupboard or a room at a time. Asking someone to help us or to pray for us can make things more bearable. And having three boxes is a good idea – one for things to keep, one for things to give away and one for things to throw away or recycle. With each object we can ask ourselves:



Why do I own this?

How is it adding value to my life?

Why should I keep it?

Who might it benefit if I gave it away?

If we haven't used something, or thought about something, or had not something broken repaired for a year or more then that is a good sign that we no longer need it. Letting go will bring a sense of relief, hopefulness and new energy. We can find constructive ways to move them on - give them to someone else, donate to a charity shop, offer for sale, or recycle them, blessing others or our planet. We too, like those early disciples, can share things and raise money to help others in need. It will not only give us joy but also restore us to a place of rest, freedom, motivation, peace and blessing. And in doing so we will discover afresh that our hope and worth and treasure truly are in Christ and his kingdom.