

Making Ourselves Rich

Dear friends,

These days gold-coloured Routemaster buses are parading the streets of London, celebrating fifty years of Queen Elizabeth's reign. We call it the "golden Jubilee", a term taken from the Old Testament - with the difference that the Old Testament doesn't make any mention of "golden" and that "Jubilee" has a meaning that has little to do with pompous celebrations of an earthly kingdom.

The Jubilee only appears in two chapters of the Bible, Leviticus 25 and 27. In the first of these, the Jubilee is the fiftieth year where we should celebrate and, most of all, rest, trusting that God will provide us with all we need. We shall forgive each other's debts and liberate those who did not enjoy freedom.

Leviticus 27 tells us of rather complex arrangements regarding land ownership. The moral of the story is that in every year of Jubilee, the land goes back to its original owner: God. It is a reminder that people like the Duke of Westminster may not be very fond of - a reminder that all property is ultimately God's and shall be regularly redistributed, so that everyone may benefit from these resources. Interestingly, Leviticus 26, cunningly placed between the celebration of Jubilee and the "property reminder", tells some awful stories of what God will do if we don't follow his commandments; some of this chapter appears to me like a fairly accurate description of today's world.

Forgiveness of debts and resting for an entire year are concepts that are not precisely popular in our society. They seem to be the complete opposite of ideas like "achievement" and "success".

My 2002 diary has a quote for each week, and most of these quotes are about achievements and success. However, there is one for the week of 17 June that is the odd one out. It is by Henry David Thoreau and reads: "We make ourselves rich by making our wants few."

Thoreau was very different from today's average Londoner. Instead of squeezing into a rush-hour tube to go to work in a vain attempt to meet ever increasing accommodation and living costs, he was a very lazy guy. He spent most of his days listening to birds, watching insects, contemplating and, occasionally, gathering some wood for his fireplace. Even for his time, the mid-19th century, his accommodation was very basic: a small wooden cabin near a lake somewhere in the middle of nowhere. But when reading through his journal a few years ago, I found that this peculiar man was, after all, very happy. His contemporaries called him a fool - which is exactly what he would call anyone who squeezes into a rush-hour tube train. And if you asked me, I think he's right.

Happiness does not increase with material wealth. In fact, it's often the opposite. Let's not forget that out of the last 100 generations in this country, only a mere two or three have had the privilege of central heating, TVs, cars, etc. Have we really come that far to believe that life would be impossible without these things - or that we could not be happy without them?

The only way to a true Jubilee is simplicity. How can we do what the biblical Jubilee requires of us: forgiving debts, celebrating, resting and setting others free - if we ourselves

are slaves of so-called comfort? We need to decide which kind of Jubilee we want. We can either have the celebration of worldly achievements or the celebration of the kingdom of God. If we want the latter, I suppose the best way to achieve this is to be foolish like Thoreau - and to make ourselves truly rich.