

how much for the life of a child?

a sermon preached on the

feast of the transfiguration

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Lections: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Ps 97; 2 Peter 1.16-19, 20-21; Mark 9.2-10

During the week I caught up with a friend whom I met when we were both studying Greek – friendships forged in difficult circumstances are always enduring. He is now doing research on the theology of poverty in Paul's letters. In the course of our conversation, he made a reference to Peter Singer, the Australian moral philosopher and bioethicist who divides his time between Princeton and Melbourne Universities. Singer is a utilitarian, which means his conception of moral good is based on achieving the best outcomes for the greatest number of people, which means, notoriously, sometimes one person prospers at the expense of another, especially in his theory of effective altruism and world poverty.

On altruism and world poverty, he uses parable-like stories or thought experiments. I would like to take you through two of them. In the first, a woman is passing a small pond in which a child is playing. The woman is well dressed, going to a meeting. She notices that the child is not in fact playing, but drowning. Naturally, she wants to save the child, but registers that doing so will require wading into the pond which will probably ruin a good pair of shoes, wet her clothes and, because she would need to find the child's parents as well as change, she would be late for the meeting.

What should she do? I know what you're thinking, obviously, the life of the child is paramount and the sacrifice involved is minimal, a small expense, some inconvenience. Although Singer, as a utilitarian, might argue otherwise in some circumstances.

In the second parable, a man is taking his vintage car for a drive. It is an especially valuable car, indeed so valuable that no company will insure it. But, because he knows its value is expected to rise dramatically, he has put his life savings into it. It is, effectively, his superannuation. On his drive he decides to take a walk. He parks near a disused railway siding and sets off alongside the main track. He notices in the distance a small child playing on the track. The child is out of earshot but it seems likely there is a parent nearby, although he cannot see it.

He then notices a runaway freight carriage careering out of control along the track from the other direction. If it hits the child, the child will be killed. The child is too far away for him to run and reach it and it will not hear him shout. However, near where he is standing is the switch for the siding, so he can redirect the runaway carriage into it and the child will be safe. Unfortunately however, his vintage car will be destroyed by the freight carriage which will derail in the siding. All his life savings will be gone.

What should he do? Clearly a child's life is more important than a car, is it not? This is no different from the first parable, except that the cost of acting is greater. So, our own consciences, and Singer, direct us to save the child. Singer uses this parable to ask how much is too much and what are the relative values involved here? Should a person sacrifice one's entire financial security and that of a family to save the life of one person?

Singer uses these parables to make the observation that the relative value of the life savings of people in the West – generally speaking – exceeds their real need – not just their wants, but their needs to a substantial extent. And then he asks the question: While preserving a reasonable standard of financial security, how much of one's surplus should be used to supply the necessities of life for the impoverished? None? Some? All?

Singer supports his argument with some real world data. In 2007, when his book was published, 1.4 billion people lived on less than \$2 a day (that's Australian Dollars and, for the economists, the \$2 is adjusted for foreign exchange and purchase parity). Further, in 2007, 9 million children under five years old died from causes related to poverty. The greater part of these deaths were avoidable and for very small amounts of money.

This is a short excerpt from Singer's book *The Life You Can Save*. It doesn't do justice to his overall argument but it poses the question, if the scale of death of children – the value of whose lives we have already affirmed in Singer's parables – is so great and our relative wealth so far in excess of what we need, why has the problem not been addressed? It's the old, old question: how to solve world hunger.

Singer's logic is pretty clear, so why have we not acted on it? Most of us in this country live in affluence beyond our reasonable needs, we have a surplus that could be applied to life saving, indeed this parish has an income from its investments that could be put to different use. Why don't we? Is it that even Singer's clear logic does not convict us? Does it demonstrate a failure of the rationality we live by?

In Mark's account of Jesus' transfiguration we find a symbol of our own rationality. When the disciples see Jesus with Elijah and Moses, Peter suggests that he might build dwellings for the three of them – some physical, material, worldly thing that might contain the divine. Peter has missed the point of the transfiguration, he continues to see only the incarnate Jesus the human, not the divine Jesus who is God. Peter's failure to see the divine makes him blind to the wider reality, the transcendent reality of God enfleshed.

Peter is the metaphor of ourselves – worldly, rational and of limited apprehension of the divine. Peter misses the point that there is a transcendent reality that renders our human logic inadequate, and that there is truth beyond our economics and science and rational thinking.

So, in the transfiguration we are called to live apart from the limited rationality of our own thinking and do the unthinkable. Elaine Graham, a British public theologian, calls us to a public demonstration of this truth of faith by forming what she calls an alternative community. That is to say, a community that does not live by the 'rules' of the world, but by the transcendent rules of the one glorified on the mountain, the one whose glory Peter struggled to see.

I believe when we truly see that transcendent glory of Christ, then the decision whether to pull the switch to divert the runaway carriage off the track or to expend our superannuation or our church investment income, not on ourselves but on others, will not be a decision at all but will be the reflexive action of a person alive in Christ.

This is not an argument, however, to wait until we see Christ fully; rather it is an argument for urgent change, for transfiguration of our lives so that, through such action, we will see Christ in us and us in Christ, and without thinking twice, do the unthinkable.