

Lightening up on Tech Stocks

Edmund Jones / May 19, 2013 / The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

This year thousands of American tourists will travel to Europe. Fine - but one of them has my credit card!

In *Rome* they will gaze on the ruins of the Forum where “at the base of Pompey’s statue, which all the while ran blood, great Caesar fell. O what a fall was there, my countrymen”.

In *Paris* they will stand in the Place de la Concorde and fancy they hear again the men from Marseille sing: “Marchons, marchons.”

In *Athens* they will stand on Mars Hill where St. Paul preached a famous sermon which had all the inspirational force of a four day old bagel.

Like us, the people of the Bible were also fascinated by ancient civilisations which were as far removed in time from them as Greece and Rome are from us. In Babylon (which we call Iran) they gazed on a great terraced earthwork, tiered like a wedding cake which reached up to the heavens. It is still there. On the top of this ancient crumbling edifice were the ruins of an old temple, perhaps a shrine to the Moon god. And they heard old folktales about it which had circulated for hundreds of years. They took both what they *heard* and what they *saw* to express a faith that is the foundation of our faith today.

You know how the story starts: “And the whole earth had one language and one speech”. And immediately we shake our heads for we know that the human race never had a universal language. But our storyteller is no literalist. He is using a metaphor about the oneness of the whole earth. As John Donne said: “No man is an island”. And that is right, isn’t it? We are all inter-connected.

For when you washed this morning did you not use soap - a substance invented by the ancient Gauls?

When you shaved were you not imitating a ceremony first developed by the ancient priests of Sumer?

When you put on a suit was that not a form of dress native to the Asiatic Steppes?

If you added your tie isn’t that the remnant of a shoulder-shawl from a 7th century Croat?

If you glanced at the newspaper you were reading Arabic characters, on a Chinese invention called paper, set there by means of a German process. When you got into your car, I hope you thanked God for a Swiss engineer, working in Paris, who first prepared the way for a German Benz and an American Ford.

And in that prayer you were thanking a Hebrew God, in an Indo-European language called English which comes from Angle, a district in Holstein which was annexed by Prussia.

And when you give your offering a little later in the service, the coins go back to ancient Lydia, but the paper money first appeared in China about the 14th century. The treasurer respectfully requests that you stay with your Chinese roots.

So the storyteller is right. The whole earth is one. Then he moves on. The ancient pioneers settled in the plain of Shinar, and they said : ”Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone and slime had they for mortar”. The human race was moving into the early era of technology. For once you invent brick you’ll need to incorporate and set up the Brick Manufacturing Company. Then there will come the Brick Layers Union and the Brick Transport Company. For technology creates all kinds of sub-groups whose interests will often conflict. And because there is conflict you are going to need lawyers. Sorry about that! And because no construction company can stay with blue collar workers you’ll soon need architects, surveyors, planners and CPA’s.

You may start small like Apple, but you will grow and in due course you’ll be on the watch for prestige projects. “And they said: Go to, let us build us a city and a tower whose top may reach heaven”. Thus arose the prototype for the Chrysler building in New York, the Sears building in Chicago and the Washington Memorial in DC.

Now you may think this has very little to do with religion, but the storyteller sees it otherwise. Remember he is re-telling an old folktale and in it expressing his faith. Soon their language was confused. For confusion of speech is one of the first signs of disharmony. The fights between one group and another always include words. So in the end they were so much at sixes and sevens that they “left off building the city”. Or to put it another way round - things were no longer tickety boo - which is an original Scottish song - or a later Danny Kaye one if you so choose.

What the biblical writer is telling us is that it is not humankind’s ignorance that threatens his community with disaster but its knowledge. It is the powers with advanced technology - think of North Korea or Iran or maybe Pakistan - who pose the greatest threat to the very survival of our fragile globe. Could it be that the most advanced techniques in food or climate carry the greatest dangers? Could it be that we have too big a stake in

technological progress and too small a stake in spiritual things, too big a stake in the Dow and too small a stake in flowers, too big a stake in dividends and too small a stake in family conversations?

The Bible sees all too clearly that the problem of our earth lies not in our head but in our heart, not in our skills but in our priorities, not in whether we can build cities, but in whether we can create communities. When we come to the end of life's journey will we say: "I wish I had spent more time in the office or I wish I had spent more time with my loved ones. I say it again the danger lies not in our weaknesses but in our strengths. Think of that in terms of the community of faith.

Here is a church and it takes seriously the Bible as the cradle of the Christ. That is a great strength for people are hungry for a saving word that comes from beyond. But let it beware lest the Book become an end in itself, an uncomfortable word which has become domesticated to keep religious folk comfortable. Sunday mornings are not about sweet Jesus, but about following Him through thick and thin when the values of our society are otherwise.

Here is a church which prides itself on its music. That is a great strength because religion was sung before it was ever spoken, and the heart must be won over before the head can be persuaded. But let it remember those who have no song in their hearts - for life muted their joy a long time ago.

And the same is true on a personal level.

If I love my children I want the best for them. But can I step back and allow them to make their own mistakes? Can I let them be themselves even when I think I know better? And I probably do!

If I believe the ups and downs of life are the raw material out of which God fashions our souls for heaven, can I embrace the dark moments of my life as well as the bright, the tears as well as the smiles, the sad farewells as well as the morning greetings?

And finally a word to those who have been confirmed in their faith today. We are so proud of you. You bring new vigour and energy into our midst. This service is not your graduation so that you move on. It is your *confirmation* so that you can move in. Listen carefully to what I want to tell you now.

Even those of us who have been part of the community of faith for a long time know that the church can sometimes be very boring and stuffy, focusing on quite the wrong things. Your calling today is to change that spirit. Personally I don't think the doctrine matters all that much. - but don't tell Cindy! What does matter is that you keep reminding us of the kind of progress we need.

It is the glory of our time that we have found the resources to conquer space, yet failed to find the resources to conquer inner city poverty and suburban loneliness.

It is the glory of our time that you have more things that your grandparents ever dreamed of, but you also inherit a society where there are more single parents and battered babies and brutal killings.

It is the glory of our time that we have immediate communications at our fingertips, but too often marriages are less stable, families less contented and relationships less satisfying.

Don't misunderstand me! The glory is real enough. I am not suggesting that we go back to the horse and buggy, to wick lamps and the bonnets of yesteryear. The good old days were not always good. I am saying that the counterpart of Babel in the Old Testament is Pentecost in the New Testament. There the storyteller uses vivid images of fire and wind to tell of a new kind of people fired up within. They are not crazies or neurotics. They are not even drunk. Peter says they can't be. It is only nine in the morning. The pubs don't open until 11 am!! No! They are possessed by a new spirit which fills their mouths with song, their hearts with gladness and their steps with purpose. That is what we want for you our young confirmands - and not just for you but also for our church where the old shall have their visions and the young shall have their dreams. So let it be! So let it be!