



13 - 19 December 2009

THEME OF THE WEEK

Economics: Ethics,
Morality and the Happy Life

Week 3: Happiness

A NEW MORALITY



Advent hope is about the coming of a Messiah. It is described by the prophets as a new age, marked by peace and plenty, by banqueting and feasting, by security and rest. It has a material as well as a spiritual dimension. But it all depends on justice – a justice for which we hunger and thirst (Matthew 5:6), and a justice made perfect by the coming of God as judge and liberator.

Christians believe that the new age (more often described as ‘the Kingdom of God’) has already begun with Jesus the ‘Christ’ (Messiah, anointed one). In the Gospels its messianic character is pictured in the Gospel of John. That Gospel’s sacramental imagery blends into one the material and spiritual dimensions of that new age. It is right, but also a challenge, to see how that messianic reality should find expression in our economic life.

‘Economics is essentially a moral science, not a natural science,’ wrote the influential economist John Maynard Keynes to Roy Harrod. ‘That is to say, ‘he continued, ‘it employs introspection and judgements of value...with motives, expectations, psychological uncertainties.’

In recent decades, business management schools have increasingly incorporated courses in business ethics. But are ethics enough? The more one looks at the causes of the present economic crisis, the more one suspects that there are places that ethics cannot reach. The issues that need to be addressed are deeper than principles, codes of conduct and procedures for

decision-making. They are to do with underlying values, types of virtue, dominant motivation and the basic purposes that shape economic life. That is to say that the problem is one not just of ethics but of morality. Morality is something embedded in culture, not simply enshrined in codes. It is a dimension once given prominence by classical economists such as Adam Smith with his theory of the moral sentiments and in a different way by visionaries such as John Ruskin.

Today voices are becoming louder that our economic life must indeed be fully grounded in morality. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, issued on the 7th of July of this year, on the eve of the G8 meeting, stressed that: ‘... every economic decision has a moral consequence [italics in original]... Perhaps at one time it was conceivable that first the creation of wealth could be entrusted to the economy, and then the task of distributing it could be assigned to politics. Today that would be more difficult.’

Two weeks later, in an interview with the Sunday Times of 19 July. Lord Myners, the Minister for the City expressed his concern that we may have ‘neglected’ the moral purpose of life: ‘This is very evident in the financial community – that money has become everything. People have lost their sense of purpose. The absence of clear moral purpose is something that is very troubling.’

That was followed by the publication of *Good Value* by Stephen Green, an Anglican priest, who also



happens to be former Chief Executive and currently Chair of HSBC. His critique was directed at the compartmentalisation of our economic and moral lives, which results in 'seeing our work life as being a neutral realm in which questions of value (other than shareholder value) or rightness (other than what is lawful) or of wisdom (other than what is practical) need not arise.'

The return of morality to economic life does not mean placing a damper on our activity. Far from it. A healthy morality would breathe new life into our economy. It would reveal the impoverished character of the prevailing economic morality with its emaciated model of 'economic man' (motivated by self-interested utilitarian calculations) and its impersonal rule of 'efficient markets'. It would spark off vital questions about the actual purpose of what we are doing.

Morality need not mean austerity, asceticism, guilt. Morality can – and should – also mean freedom, justice, fulfilment. An economy infused with that sort of morality is more likely to lead to true prosperity and real happiness. That is what will be explored in this week's reflections.

They will start with an exploration of the theme of

happiness presented in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul had made his own personal move from an old to a new morality. Once he had sought to follow the Biblical laws to perfection, but then he saw that the letter killed and that in the Spirit a new life and a new kind of freedom could be lived in Christ (Philippians 3:4-9). Thus even when in detention in Rome, facing the possibility of execution, he was a free man, urging those outside to rejoice (Philippians 4:4).

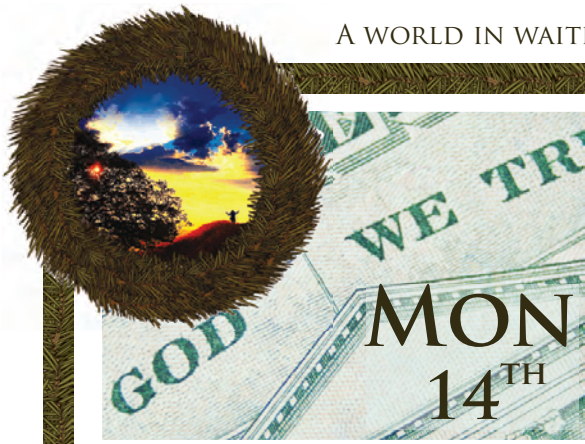
That call to rejoice, in the reading from Philippians, is traditionally used for the Third Sunday of Advent, which is why it is called 'Gaudete Sunday' (gaudete: rejoice). How deeply that message of joy is needed was marvellously illustrated in the almost ecstatic welcome given in April 2009 to the new Archbishop of New York, Timothy Dolan, known for his joviality as well as his conservatism.

This week's reflections on happiness and the new morality will not be about a search for some silver lining to the economic hardships of our times nor will they try to make the utilitarian case that 'religion is good for your health'. They will look at various ways in which economic activity needs to be rooted in a deeper moral culture. The reflections will be based on the readings for the third week of Advent, drawing on the Epistle to the Philippians.

Scripture taken from New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright 1989, 1995, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Photo within wreath: marc crumpler ©13

Publication © Churches Together in Britain and Ireland



Paul and Seneca on the Happy Life A TALE OF TWO CITIZENSHIPS

Philippians 4:4-7

Paul was a Roman citizen. He was also familiar with Hellenistic thought. And in his two decades of missionary journeys across the Mediterranean he spent much time in many of the principal urban centres. This, plus the experience of his own dramatic conversion from Judaism, gave him an outlook in marked contrast to, and frequent tension with, the church in Judea and Galilee. He had become a new person, even changing his name from Saul to Paul. He promoted a Christian morality among whose main themes were freedom, grace, love and universality.

Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians when in detention awaiting trial and eventual execution. Even under such conditions, he kept his sights high. He encouraged the Christians in Philippi to pursue all that is noble (Philippians 4:8). He spoke about happiness, his own and theirs. They were a great joy to him (Philippians 4:10) just as he, in turn, was urging them to rejoice (Philippians 4:4).

At almost the time Paul was urging the Philippians to be joyful (probably 60-65AD), or perhaps a few years previously, the distinguished Stoic, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, had composed his essay 'On the Happy Life'. Seneca, like Paul, knew good times and bad. Both accepted everything as part of God's will and both had something to say about happiness and citizenship. Both were Roman citizens and both were destined to die unjustly as a result of Roman imperial paranoia.

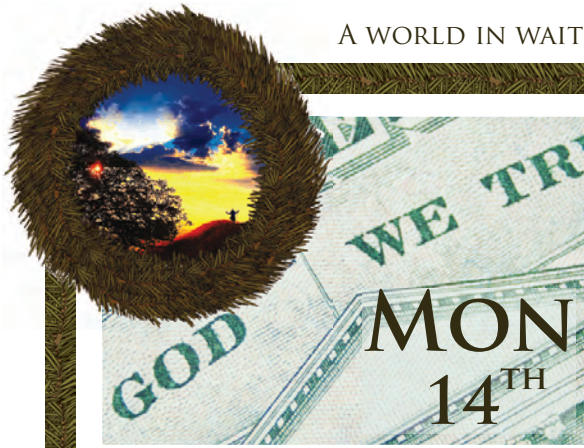
Paul (c.2BC - 62/65AD) and Seneca (c.1BC- 65 AD) were almost exact contemporaries. By a remarkable coincidence, the Proconsul before whom Paul had been brought in 51 or 52 AD and who declared that religious disputes between Jews and Christians were none of the civil court's business, was Seneca's elder brother, Gallio (Acts of the Apostles 18: 5-12). It was this Gallio to whom Seneca addressed his essay 'On the Happy Life'. And Gallio, like his younger brother took his own life, probably also on Nero's orders.

There is no reason to think that Paul and Seneca ever met each other or borrowed ideas from each other. But,

in the Middle Ages, a charming legend emerged that Paul and Seneca had actually corresponded. The very fact that such a belief could have been entertained over several centuries is, in itself, a splendid tribute both to the openness and respect which Christian theology showed towards what would today be called 'secular' thought and to the fruitfulness of Seneca's dialogic rather than purely didactic approach. Such attitudes must surely be welcomed today in any common attempt, amongst people of all religious faiths or none, to infuse economic life with a new moral spirit.

The focus here, however, is not on the coincidences of their lives or their alleged correspondence but what they had to say about happiness. In spite of all their sufferings and unjust treatment, both wanted to tell us something about the nature and the source of happiness. For both Paul and Seneca, happiness had a religious character or, perhaps more accurately, religion was the basis of happiness. Not the short-lived happiness that consists from a superficial religious high nor the compensatory happiness offered by 'the opium of the people'. But the happiness that comes from having a goal, from knowing that that goal is true and in accordance with deepest reality, and from living according to the path that leads to that goal.

For Seneca, the obligations that followed from this had the character of obedience to God ('We have been born under a monarchy, and in obedience to God is our liberty'). For Seneca, the first duty prescribed by God is proper care for one's own self, that is to say one's character ('True happiness resides in virtue... Virtue will love the one in whose service she falls, her commander; she will keep in mind that old precept: follow God'). That is the secret of peace ('the highest good is harmony of the spirit'), freedom (from servitude to fortune and pleasure) and great joy ('...the one with such a grounding [in the highest good]...will be accompanied by continuous cheerfulness and a profound happiness that comes from deep inside him'). Thus, 'you should remain unmoved, whether you face evil or enjoy good, so that, as far as is permitted, you may represent God'.



For Paul also it was a matter of urging his fellow believers to rejoice, in spite of his confinement. 'The very dungeon was consecrated by his virtue.' These were Seneca's words about Socrates. They could just as well apply to Paul. Like Seneca, Paul drew his happiness from an unwavering faith in God.

What has all this to do with economics? For one thing it has something to say about our attitude to wealth. Seneca: 'I say that wealth is not a good...But that it is desirable, that it is useful and confers great benefits on life, that I do admit.' As a very wealthy person himself, Seneca made no apologies for his situation: 'Enough, therefore, of your banning philosophers from possessing money: no one has sentenced wisdom to poverty...What doubt can there be that the wise man has greater scope for displaying his powers if he is rich than if he is poor...[and that] wealth allows a spacious field to moderation, generosity, diligence, good management and magnanimity?' Yet he claimed that he would be just as happy sleeping on a bale of hay as on a soft mattress.

And so with Paul. Even though, at the end of all his labours, he had few material resources, his only care was the spiritual profit accruing to the people amongst whom he had ministered – that was his receipt, 'paid in full' (Philippians 4:17-18). As for their needs, he assured them: 'My God will supply all your wants out of the magnificence of his riches in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 4:19). His was an economics of grace, not of Fortune. Which meant that his joy was greater than that of Seneca's. For whereas Seneca's happiness was derived from an obedience to nature, Paul's was based on attachment to Christ. His suffering was not just something to be borne with equanimity. Like the sufferings of the Philippians, he saw his suffering as a privilege because it was suffering for Christ (Philippians 1:29).

The joy experienced by Seneca and by Paul was not a private, individualised joy. It was framed in the context of citizenship. Seneca prided himself

on being a 'citizen of the world', Paul on being a citizen of heaven. Seneca's Stoicism, superimposed on classic Roman morality was ideally suited to the ruling class of the vast Roman empire – a philosophy of citizenship. It stressed natural justice – duty and responsibility, freedom and dignity, character and virtue. At certain periods of his life, Seneca had played a public role. He had once tutored the 13-year old Nero, the emperor-to-be, and later acted as Nero's adviser and speechwriter. Paul insisted that Christians should consider themselves as 'citizens of heaven, and from heaven we expect our deliverer to come...' (Philippians 3:20).

But being citizens of heaven did not mean turning their backs on early realities. It involved a transformation and extension of the idea of citizenship. It was an image that was to feature prominently in later Christian theology, most significantly, as developed by Augustine of Hippo, who viewed the heavenly city as already intermingling with the earthly city in human history – here and now.

In modern times the sense of citizenship has played an important role as a crucial backdrop for economics, including for the philosophy of Adam Smith and for the perspective of the founders of the American Republic. The 'pursuit of happiness' was put forward alongside, not as an alternative, to civic responsibility.

In our own times the notion of citizenship can still provide a crucial backdrop for key principles of economic life. There are such things as economic rights and economic duties. The former are not simply individualist claims any more than the latter are simply impositions by the State. Such rights and duties may take different forms in different times and different places. But if we see them in the context of citizenship, we are far more likely to identify those which are more likely to lead to happiness and prosperity.

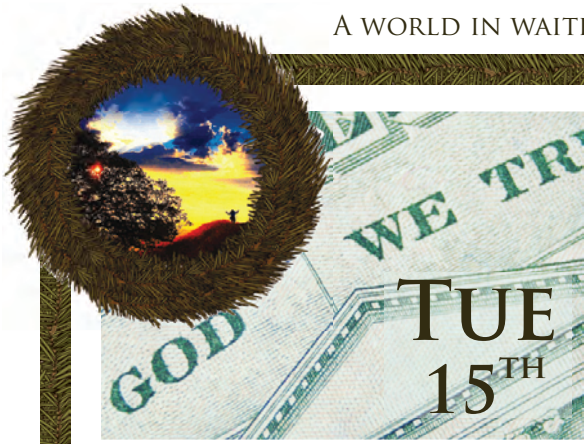
ACTION

What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

Institute for Citizenship
<http://www.citizen.org.uk>

Article 13 - Corporate Responsibility & Sustainability
<http://www.article13.com/>

Corporate Social Responsibility
 (European Commission)
http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/csr/index_en.htm



From the
'DISMAL SCIENCE' to...

Philippians 4:4-7

Long before he applied to it the term 'the dismal science', Thomas Carlyle had become a bitter critic of the political economy of his day.

Writing with reference to the economic views of Thomas Malthus, Carlyle complained: 'Nowhere, in that quarter of his intellectual world, is there light; nothing but the grim shadow of Hunger' (Fraser's Magazine, 1834). This was triggered by Malthus' gloomy prophecy, in his 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population*, that: 'Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio.' The basic remedy against this tendency towards impoverishment, according to Malthus, was moral restraint – voluntarily limiting the number of children to keep in line with natural resources. Carlyle was writing in the year when the harsh Poor Law Amendment Act was passed. Five years later, on the eve of the Hungry 40s, Carlyle repeated the charge against Malthus: 'Dreary, stolid dismal, without hope for this world or the next' (Chartism, 1839).

But it was not until 1849, at the end of that decade of famine, disease and revolution that Carlyle coined the term 'the dismal science'. He applied it not to Malthus but to political economists such as John Stuart Mill, who had made common cause with evangelicals in condemning the system of slavery (already abolished in England). What was it that a liberal political philosopher and conservative evangelicals had in common that unleashed such a critique? In Carlyle's eye it was what he called 'the cash nexus'.

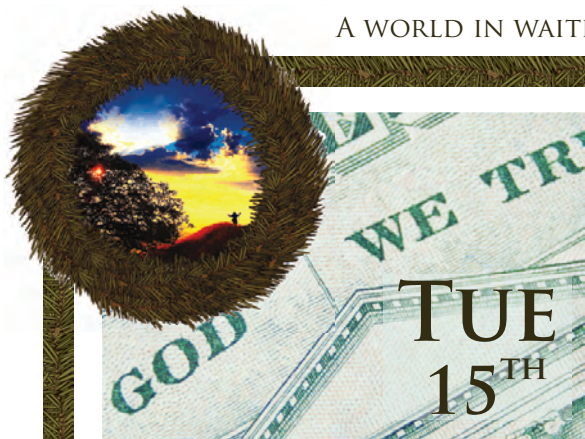
His point was that at least under slavery, as under feudalism, there remained some kind of interpersonal relationship, albeit far from acceptable, between master and slave, between lord and serf. The result of the replacement of such bonds by the crude 'cash nexus' was that the 'freedom' both of West Indian slaves and

Irish peasants was turning into an inhuman disaster. Carlyle wrote this in an article whose language we now recognise as deeply offensive but which may be a salutary reminder of where we are coming from: *Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question*, Fraser's Magazine, 1849.

The prevailing economic science of Carlyle's day was dismal – in its values, its principles, its vision of society and in its human consequences. It stood in stark contrast to the rosier view of Adam Smith, according to whom economic freedom was supposed to promote happiness. In Smith's view prosperity would ensue naturally because of the underlying invisible harmony woven into creation by God. And it would all happen serendipitously, because it did not depend on impossible assumptions either about human intelligence (the ability to plan) or altruism. Self-interest, plus a natural measure of sympathy and concern for duty would be enough. It is astonishing to see this naïve faith in a divinely established natural harmony still being professed by some economists, when its underlying world-view has long been discredited by almost every other science, whether cosmology, biology, sociology or politics.

But, leaving aside Smith's theological premises, Smith's economic principles did not seem to be working in the real world. Although there is evidence that workers' wages did increase between Smith's time and Carlyle's, the social uprootedness, the cultural impoverishment and the moral degradation of the increasingly urbanised working class was truly shocking – and was beginning to pose a threat to the established political order.

But by a century later the condition of the working class and society as a whole had improved immensely. So was Smith, rather than Carlyle, right after all? Only if we forget that the social progress of the past two



centuries was due not simply to the laws of political economy ('the cash nexus') but also to genuine humane social reforms on the part of the middle and upper classes and political organisation and struggle on the part of the working class. The welfare state hardly represents a natural development of 18th century political economy.

But a troubling question remains. Although we are infinitely more prosperous now than we were even fifty years ago let alone in Smith's time are we happier? Economists, such as Tibor Scitovsky, began to express doubts over a quarter of a century ago. In his book *The Rough Guide to Happiness*, published earlier this year, Nick Baylis gives far more attention to the multiplicity of therapies being tried by people in their desperate search for happiness than he does to the question of money. Might Carlyle have had a point? Is the ever-increasing role of 'the cash nexus' part of the problem?

It is not that money and material goods are irrelevant to happiness. Anyone tempted to say 'Money does not buy happiness' might ask themselves whether they would be happy to welcome a 4% increase in the rate of income tax (as has been the case in Ireland) or a 20% cut in pay (as has been the case with those whose working hours have been cut by one day a week). It is not money but the love of money (philarguria) which

is the root of all evil, according to I Timothy 6:10. To which we might add: it is also the role of money. It is when economic life is ruled by money rather than nobler cultural values and deeper social bonds that we are headed in the wrong direction.

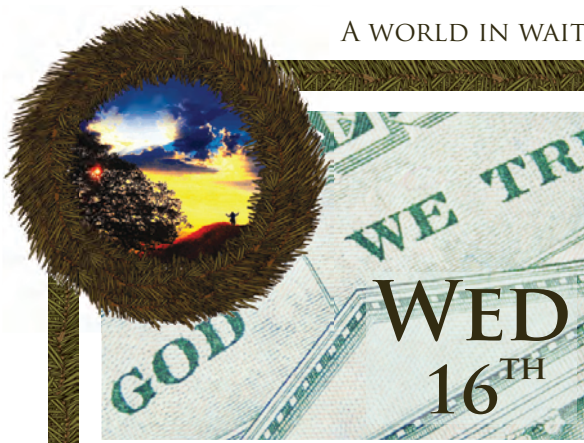
What, then, are the connections between money, material goods and happiness? Can our economic theories, systems and behaviour be re-shaped so as to ensure that they truly are oriented to the pursuit of happiness?

Sceptics would say no. They invoke the obvious objection that happiness is such a subjective thing as to make nonsense of any claim to a scientific 'economics of happiness'. But that has not stopped economists trying. And that will be the subject of the following reflection.

ACTION

What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

Richard Layard (Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics), *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, Penguin 2005.



Challenge or Obscenity?

THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

Philippians 4:4-7

Does the promotion of a gospel of prosperity represent a betrayal of Jesus' proclamation of good news to the poor? Is the good news simply that the poor can be rich, too, if they would only obey God's commands? Or is the good news that the rich will be deprived of their unjustly gained wealth? Perhaps, rather than trading Biblical texts to prove one or other side of the argument, it might be better to look at the pattern of life of Jesus himself – how does that square with the promotion of the quest for material prosperity?

Towards the end of the last century, Christians became so troubled by the scandalous gap between rich and poor that they were rallying – with greater or lesser enthusiasm – behind church leaders' calls for a 'bias to the poor' and even for 'the Church of the Poor'. Whole Christian communities embraced a theology of liberation which inspired Christians to commit themselves to bringing to an end the structures and cultures of domination which kept people in poverty.

Yet at the very same time, in stark contrast, the 'Prosperity Gospel' movement was taking hold, especially amongst Pentecostal Christians and especially in the United States. 'Prosperity' according to that gospel includes not just riches, but good health, happy marriages and success in whatever endeavour. This was the period when the extravagant life-style of its pastors – paid for by donations from largely poor congregations – was actually being held up as a proof that the Gospel worked: Luke 6:38 – 'Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, will be poured onto your lap. For whatever measure you deal out to others will be dealt to you in return.' As the financial and sexual scandals associated with some of its most high-profile preachers came to light, that gospel's appeal, understandably, tended to diminish.

However, that was not the end of the story. In the boom years of the 1990s and the early 20s the Prosperity

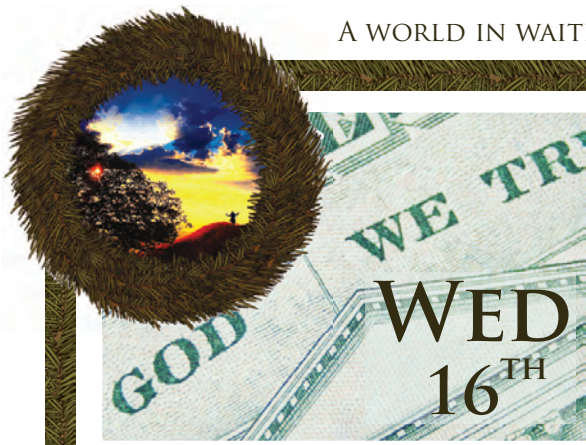
Gospel made a comeback. This time it was not so much about corrupt pastors as about encouraging people to take advantage of the opportunities that indeed were there to buy a home, become rich and have one's dream fulfilled: 'I tell you, whatsoever you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive them and they will be yours' (Mark 11:24) and 'I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it in all its fullness' (John 10:10).

In September 2006 the challenge was blazoned on the cover of Time Magazine: 'Does God Want You to Be Rich?' That helped spark off a heated debate which became even more heated once the credit crunch began to bite. Pentecostals themselves were divided. Some were even accused of having helped contribute to the credit crunch by having encouraged their congregations to take out sub-prime mortgages.

On this side of the Atlantic, some years before the Time article, the churches were also taking a close look at prosperity, but by no means in the same way as the Prosperity Gospel. Here the new emphasis on wealth as a positive good stressed the need to handle wealth responsibly and with a concern for social justice and the sustainability of the environment.

To that end, in 2001 Churches Together in Britain and Ireland commissioned a consultation which concluded with a report in 2005, *Prosperity with a Purpose* (ironically the same title as that of the Conservative Party Manifesto for the October 1964 election). Within two years, however, the world was thrown into recession.

So where does all this leave us? It should come as no surprise that people who are poor might resist hearing a Gospel that seems to glorify poverty in favour of one which points the way out of poverty. They might understandably resent it when well-to-do people proclaim 'the Good News to the Poor' whilst refusing



to let go of their own power and privileges. Nor is it surprising that some of those who are comfortably off would not be at all displeased to see the spread of a 'Prosperity Gospel' which would assuage any feelings of middle-class guilt.

A cynic might be forgiven for concluding that the answer is to proclaim the Prosperity Gospel to the poor and save the 'Good News to the Poor' for the well-to-do. But clearly that would not do. There is one Gospel for one people, saved by one Lord, bound in one covenant as citizens of one heavenly kingdom.

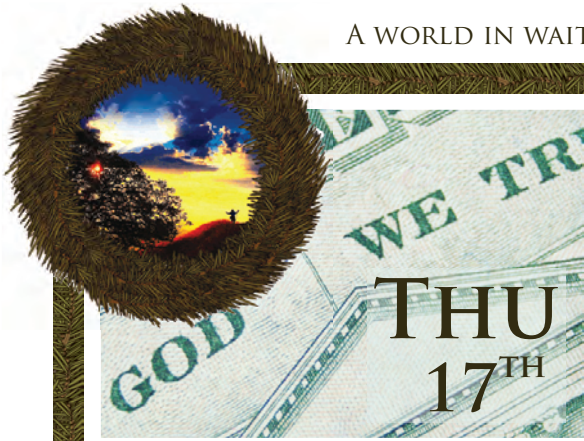
Why not begin with the covenant? Its promise of prosperity was conditional on the pursuit of justice. The oppression of the poor, whether by individuals or by unjust structures, is abhorrent in the sight of God and is the path to ruin for all. These are not abstractions. The economic injustices of our times are real and so must our response be real. The sharper the divisions between rich and poor the more pressing the question: where and with whom do we stand.

But if the question of covenantal justice is our starting point, what is the end point? Is prosperity a goal to be aimed at in its own right or is it the by-product and a constituent part of a wider and nobler goal – the goal of a good life and a good society? The task is not to embrace austerity and renounce prosperity. It is to enjoy a richer, fuller prosperity and to get it into focus.

With that, however, some of us may have a problem. For Christianity has at certain periods appeared to cultivate a quasi-monastic spirituality and seemed to turn its back on material prosperity. Furthermore, since the Protestant reformation, a Puritan ethic has virtually sanctified hard work and savings, whilst deferring gratification and treating pleasure with suspicion. Now, in an age where consumer goods are available in abundance, the challenge may be to see these as gifts of God not to be refused but to be used well, to be shared and at times, to find ways of protesting, as did Francis of Assisi against their being given a higher place in human life and striving than they deserve.

And that perhaps is the real problem with the Prosperity Gospel. First, that it plays down that need for material goods to be shared in accordance with the demands of justice, and even more fundamentally, that it encourages the possessing and displaying of such goods to be valued as proof of personal worth, status and success. The question, in short, is about the meaning of prosperity itself – whether it is possible to develop a more moral economy with a purpose – an 'economics of happiness'.

This means that it is not enough simply to hope for an end to the recession. This period of waiting – and suffering – may be an opportunity to think again what we as a people, in covenant with each other and with our God, need to hope for.



FALSE DAWN

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk – a formidable trio. More or less contemporaries. Prophets of doom, who, with the most violent of images, announced the unleashing of God's terrible judgement on his people:

'The great Day of the Lord is near... That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness... I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the Lord, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung... In the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth'

Zephaniah 1: 15-18

Such outbursts bore witness to the prophets' exasperation with the people and their despair of genuine repentance and reform. Twice in the past one hundred years, reform movements had got off to a promising start but then petered out. It was back to business as usual – but it was not the Lord's business.

First, a century before Zephaniah, the reign of King Hezekiah (715-687BC) seemed to promise wonderful things – moral reform, the defeat of the Assyrian invaders, the reuniting of Israel and Judah, the renewal of the Davidic covenant. But then regression. Under the abominable 45-year reign of Hezekiah's successor, Manasseh (687-642), it was back to subjection to Assyria with its gods, the reopening of local pagan shrines and the toleration of sacred prostitution in the Temple itself.

Now, in Zephaniah's time, under the reign of King Josiah (640-609 BC), national renewal once again seemed to be underway. The power of the Assyrian empire was beginning to slip. The moment seemed right to seek independence, to attempt once again to reunite Israel and Judah, to centralise worship in the Temple. It was a time of almost Messianic hope, hopes boosted by the discovery of tablets containing the

old Deuteronomic law. The Davidic covenant would now be supported by the even more fundamental commitment to the original Mosaic covenant with its strong demands for strict moral and religious observance. Josiah had a special reason for being delighted at the find. It could be used to bolster support for his nationalistic ambitions.

But it was another false dawn, resulting in even more bitter disappointment. It was not that Josiah was not sincere in his reforms or that they were not radical enough. Nor was the failure due simply to the strength of opposition by local communities to whom the centralisation of religious and political power posed a threat. What proved fatal was the foolish alliance Josiah made with Egypt and Assyria against Babylon. It would lead to his death in battle, a casualty of placing national glory ahead of the concern for justice. Another false dawn.

Are there lessons for our recovery from the present economic crisis? Are we on the way to recovery? Is it back to business as usual? Or are we simply seeing a series of false dawns?

There were signs of a possible recovery in the first half of 2009 as investor confidence and consumer confidence began to pick up. Many City economists professed to believe that the recession might just about be over. But then, in June 2009, 'insiders', who held key positions in the top 500 companies listed on the US stock exchange, sold off 22 times more stock than they bought. Did they know something the rest of us did not?

By August, the signs of recovery looked much surer. UK share prices had rebounded, bank profits (largely in the investment sector) had picked up and manufacturers were expressing optimism about the future. Meanwhile US stocks, according to the Standard and Poor Index, had risen by 50% since their low in March – the greatest market rebound for over 60 years. Best of all, the recovery in the financial markets



seemed at last to be translating into recovery in the real economy. First France and Germany, then even Japan, all reported growth – much to the surprise of their own governments.

Would it last? What would happen when the economic stimuli were withdrawn? When the restocking of inventories had been completed? When the ‘cash for bangers’ ran out? When markets started anticipating how and when the recovery would end? Or when inflation began to return and interest rates were raised? And, in any case, how much of the bounce-back was a case of investors simply seeking to follow the herd, and simply accelerating a more positive trend? It was simply too early to tell. The Bank of England stunned the optimists by deciding that the economy was still in need of another £50 billion stimulus.

Whether or not the recession was over, there still remain the harsh realities of massive public sector debt and likely cuts in services and jobs in the public sector. Furthermore Moody’s reported that in the US personal income had suffered its biggest drop since January 2005 and that wage income, 5% down on the previous year, was still on the way down. The likely effect of falling incomes would be lower levels of consumer spending which might translate into fewer jobs and lower incomes, etc.

The point is not to pour cold water on hopes for a recovery. The sooner a real and lasting recovery comes the better. But will it really herald a new day? Or will we once again lapse back into our old ways, with the bonus culture as before and the assurance that if banks behave badly again they can always count on being bailed out? Zephaniah warned where that would lead: ‘Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord’s wrath...for all the traders have perished; all who weigh out silver are cut off’ (Zephaniah 11, 18).

And what about today’s young people and tomorrow’s pensioners?

For pensioners, the great fear is about the steady shrinking of the size of future pensions as well as their increased riskiness. It is expected that by the end of the next decade, the numbers on defined benefit schemes will continue to fall. Those on employer-based defined contribution pensions will receive payments amounting to only one-half the level of those on defined benefit schemes. And those on personal pension schemes will be worth only one-third the level of those on defined benefit schemes.

As for young people, in spite of all the various schemes to help the most disadvantaged young people, the number of NEETS (those Not in Employment, Education or Training) has risen to 827,000 in England alone by the first quarter of this year. The implications of this are alarming in that evidence suggests that the experience of having been neither in employment, education or training for a significant period is likely to make a person more prone to unemployment and low-paid work for the rest of their working lives.

The prophets of doom had had enough of false dawns. What they wanted was justice. Are we headed for a new day – or a darker night?

ACTION

What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

Tomorrow's Company
<http://www.tomorrowcompany.com>



A Matter of Life and Death WATER

**‘You will draw water joyfully from
the springs of salvation’**

Isaiah 12:2-6

Millions of small landholders in India have turned to extracting ground water so as to nurture their meagre crops. So much so that the groundwater is being over-exploited, according to a warning from the International Water Management Institute in August this year.

It also reminded us that rice requires a much greater amount of water than does, say, wheat, but that rice is Asia’s main staple. All the more worrying, it noted, as this year’s scarce monsoon rains have highlighted the region’s vulnerability to water shortages. Meanwhile, that same month, Typhoon Morakot, the worst ever tropical storm to hit Taiwan, dumped 9 feet (!) of rain in three days.

One of the most basic features of the real economy is water. Water is, quite simply, a matter of life and death, whether it is a case of too little (drought) or too much (flooding). The very first words of the Bible are: ‘In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.’

Interesting: the story begins not with God creating out of nothing but with the deep. God proceeds to separate the waters – first, vertically, so that some are above the heavens (a future source of rain) and others are below the heavens. Next, horizontally, the waters below the heavens are divided, so that dry land appears. Then God breathes over the waters and life is generated.

The fundamental importance of water has been recognised by almost every religion. But with a difference. The pagan religions of the Ancient Near East were aware of the power of water and worshipped various water deities. The Jewish religion, however, focussed on the justice of the one God in his deployment of water.

Contrast the story of the universal flood in the ancient

Mesopotamian religion with that of the Book of Genesis. In the former, Enlil, the God of breath and wind, had become so irritated by the noise made by the humans whom he had created that he sent a flood to wipe out the bothersome human race. In the biblical account, God sends a flood not because he was annoyed but because of the wickedness and moral corruption of most of humankind; only Noah and his family were saved, because they were just.

As with the story of the flood, so with a biblical story of a drought. Elijah famously mocked the priests of Baal whose religious antics were unable to bring about the much needed rain. And here, too, the big difference. Elijah’s God was a God of mercy and compassion.

Today we are faced with daunting problems of both flooding and drought. By the year 2025, according to the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation’s Water Development and Management Unit, 1,800 million people will be living in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity, and two-thirds of the world population could be under stress conditions. India and Kenya are among the countries already experiencing severe drought. At the same time we seem to be experiencing ever more destructive floods, monsoons and cyclones. In May last year, some 140,000 people died in Burma as a result of Cyclone Nargis, the 8th deadliest cyclone of all time.

Once upon a time we could simply interpret these phenomena as acts of God or ‘natural disasters’. That will no longer do. It is our own activity that is responsible for much of the problem. Ironically, as the Stern Report pointed out, it is the increase in CO² which is contributing both to water scarcity in some regions and leading to greater flooding in others: ‘Melting glaciers will increase flood risk during the wet season and strongly reduce dry-season water supplies to one-sixth of the world’s population, predominantly in the Indian sub-continent, parts of China and the Andes in South America... Warming is very likely to



intensify the water cycle, reinforcing existing patterns of water scarcity and abundance and increasing the risk of droughts and floods...Preliminary estimates suggest that the fraction of land area in extreme drought at any one time will increase from 1% to 30% by the end of this century. In other regions, warmer air and warmer oceans are likely to drive more intense storms, particularly hurricanes and typhoons.'

The hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica may be impairing the Southern Ocean's ability to mop up carbon dioxide from the earth's atmosphere, reports the scientific magazine *Nature*. Meanwhile, the Himalayan glaciers, which supply water to several of the world's greatest rivers and to 40% of the world's population, are melting at an alarming rate.

The urgency of the problem has been duly noted. Action is being taken. People have been exploring more efficient methods of desalinisation of sea water, redirection of rivers by means of dams, the building of water pipelines to remote village areas, the treatment of sewage, etc. But against this, multinationals working in developing countries often draw on precious local water supplies for their own processes of manufacturing, mining, pulping, etc.

But in the end it's a matter not just of technology but of justice. And that takes us back to the theme of the covenant, which was explored in the readings for the second week of Advent. First of all, we have a covenant with each other. The fact that those who are suffering most from the effects of flooding and drought are not the same as those who are most responsible for the CO₂ emissions highlights the reality of our shared responsibility.

But we also have another kind of covenant: a covenant between human beings and the environment. Those are the words used by Pope Benedict XVI in his Message

for the 2008 World Day of Peace, as well as in his recent encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, where he stresses our responsibility to strengthen 'that covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying.'

So, we are one human family and have a shared responsibility for the use and distribution of the world's resources. What does that mean in practice? It will undoubtedly mean a change in our lifestyle. The God of creation ordered the waters that we might have life. The God of justice demands that we use that gift justly.

Gradually, over the past three decades, our economic system has been turned on its head. The financial system has become master and the real economy its plaything. But now our real economy is crying out in pain. And we must listen.

ACTION

What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

WaterAid
<http://www.wateraid.org/uk>

Operation Noah
 (focusing specifically on climate change)
<http://www.operationnoah.org>

Christian Ecology Link
<http://www.christian-ecology.org.uk/index.htm>

Copenhagen 7-18 December
<http://en.cop15.dk>

<http://www.erantis.com/events/denmark/copenhagen/climate-conference-2009/index.htm>



A NEW SET OF PRACTICES

Luke 3:7-18

John ‘the Baptist’ was a threat. Or so it seemed to the officials and leaders of the people who had cast their lot with the Romans and who were benefiting from the oppression of the people. And they were right to be alarmed. For the country was divided.

The elite may have found a way of prospering under the Pax Romana but for ‘the poor’, those who were faithful to God and who had not sold out, these were hard times. Not surprising then that those days of injustice and unrest saw the emergence of a number of renewal movements. Some like the Essenes sought personal purification by withdrawing and becoming a sect. Others, like the Zealots, sought to purify the nation by confronting the oppressor in armed rebellion. No wonder the leaders were anxious to know what John was up to, what kind of movement he was starting out there in the wilderness, what label they should pin on him. John saw through their motives and so he greeted them with the cry: ‘You brood of vipers.’

Yet there were people who looked to John as the founder of a movement. But that was not how John saw himself. He had no messianic pretensions. His mission was simply to urge people to prepare for what was to come. He was first of all a preacher, and only then a baptiser.

But how to prepare? What was to be done? That was the question. And, surprisingly, it was a question put to him, sincerely, by people who, to all appearances, would have had something to fear from the ending of the old order – the well-to-do, the tax collectors, the military – all of whom enjoyed a wide degree of power, with limited accountability, over others.

John’s reply was not complicated. No excuse for putting off change whilst preparing complex action plans or engaging in long-drawn out consultations, hoping that the moment for action might pass. Now was the time to repent. Not to feel sorry about the past or to beat one’s breast but to change – now.

It was the kind of change that was to be put into practice immediately in one’s own situation. There was no point in remaining in the wilderness. It was no use simply waiting for the coming of the Lord. Those who had come out to see what was going on were to go back to their daily lives and occupations but to behave in a new way: ‘Bear fruits worthy of repentance’.

Roman soldiers were not to bully people, tax-collectors were not to over-charge, those with two shirts or a bit of extra food were to share it with those who had none. Obvious. Simple. But it would have come as a surprise to see soldiers, tax-collectors and the well-to-do behaving in this way. That would send a message alright that an ever greater change was on the way.

Preparing for the coming of the Lord does not mean turning our backs on the world, opting out, becoming monks. We all have to work, to buy, to save, and to consume. We must start where we are, whether we are bankers or bailiffs, landlords or builders, journalists or bus-drivers. It’s the choices that we make in these activities that matter – both by making a contribution to justice and to the environment and by sending a message that things must be different and that it can start with us.

ACTION

What Are We Waiting for? Witnessing to Hope

The Ethical Consumer
<http://www.ethicalconsumer.org>

Christians at Work -
<http://christiansatwork.org.uk>

Sustainable Development Commission
<http://www.sd-commission.org.uk>