

# Space in the City

## Acting Justly\*

18 May 2011

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Innocently saying my prayers yesterday, and like a good Anglican following the set readings in the Common Worship lectionary, I found myself confronted by St Luke, the Magnificat, and Moses. At a very specific moment in political and religious time – the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius Caesar's reign, when Pontius Pilate was Governor of Judea, Herod Tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip Tetrarch of the territories of Iturea and Trachonitis, Lysanias Tetrarch of Abilene, and while the High Priesthood was held by Annas and Caiaphas, the Word of God came to John (the son of a priest in the Established Church) in the desert.

And today, too: when David Cameron was Prime Minister, one year into the coalition, while Rowan was Archbishop of Canterbury, and John Archbishop of York, etc, etc, and Barack Obama President of the United States... did the word of God come at this political moment?

And what effect did the Word of God, coming to John in the desert, have on him? It caused him to go through the whole of the Jordan area proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins – sounds traditional and very boring – but which surprisingly required people to act justly in thoroughly practical ways by redistributing their wealth to ensure that everyone had enough of the goods of the earth, and no one had more than their fair share:

And when they came to him asking what should they do, he replied “anyone who has two tunics (not two houses, just two tunics) must share with the one who has none, and anyone with something to eat must do the same,” and we can extrapolate, can't we?.....'anyone who lives till they're 80 should share some of their health with someone who is going to die at 40 in Africa....'

Shortly afterwards John baptised Jesus and he in his turn, after the Spirit of God had descended on him, began his public ministry with a very political message rooted in the theme of jubilee, and the year of jubilee – which 2000 years later was to inspire the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign in which millions of people around the world pressed their economic and political masters and mistresses to “Drop the Debt” that was unjustly throttling the world's poorest nations with an unbearable and unjust bundle and burden of unpayable debt. It was a very political message.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” said Jesus referring to the jubilee year, “for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor and afflicted, and he has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the jubilee year of favour from the Lord” when the earth and its people are restored to the shalom of the right ordering of things, and against the accumulation of riches by the rich who get ever richer and power by the powerful who get ever more powerful while the poor go to the wall. Everything has to be redistributed so the bias towards accumulation is ended. And down the ages this jubilee theme and the great justice themes in Isaiah from which it is drawn have inspired generations of Christian social reformers, including the Benedictines, St Francis of Assisi, William Wilberforce and Dr Martin Luther King Jr to work and struggle and to act justly – and to die sometimes – in attempting to ensure that economically, politically, legally, financially, socially (and environmentally now) our world was ordered in a just, fair, equitable and right way, and that human beings – all human beings – were treated fairly and with dignity, and that the resources of the earth were fairly and proportionally shared amongst all people in such a way that each and every human being on the face of the earth flourished. And injustice, oppression, economic and political greed and disregard for God’s saving justice were condemned and castigated:

“Woe to those who add house to house, and join field to field until there is nowhere left for anyone else to go and they buy up all the goods of the poor and they are the sole inhabitants of the country (think of some of the great nations of the world buying up huge tracts of land in Africa to grow produce, or to mine minerals solely for the use of their own nations in the Middle East or in China... expropriating at the expense of local people).

And we think of some of the battles over the enclosure of land and the battles who owns what. “God”, Isaiah said, “expected fair judgment but found injustice – expected uprightness, but found cries of distress.” “So take your wrongdoing out of my sight, cease doing evil, learn to do good, search for justice, discipline the violent, be just to the orphan, plead for the widow and the alien.”

We forget at our peril just how soaked Jesus was in the Law and the Prophets. We forget, but we have to assume, that he knew them intimately. He doesn’t quote chapter and verse always but he was steeped in the teaching of the Prophets – they were in his DNA and formed the basis of all he did and said, schooled as he was in the interstices of Jewish Scripture and tradition, and of course being the son of the author as it were, of the word itself.

“Listen to this, you who crush the needy and reduce the oppressed to nothing. You who say ‘When will the new moon be over so that we can sell our corn, and when will the Sabbath end so that we can get into the markets and market our wheat – (and trade our futures)? Then we can make the bushel measure smaller and the shekel weight bigger by fraudulently tampering with the scales and we can buy up the wheat for silver and buy up the poor for a pair of sandals and even get a price for the sweepings of the wheat off the floor (and sell it

as if it were pristine stuff through the adverts on Channel 3). Yahweh has sworn by the pride of Jacob – ‘Never will I forget anything they have done.’”

Religion without the practice of justice – acting piously without acting justly – is a contradiction in terms – to be religious, to practise the Christian faith, requires us to act justly or to be worse than useless in God’s eyes.

“I hate, I scorn your festivals (not another one) – I take no pleasure in your endlessly solemn assemblies. When you bring me burnt offerings, your oblations I do not accept them. I do not look at your communion sacrifices.”

“Spare me the din of your chanting. Let me hear none of your strumming on lyres (or pounding on the organ), but let justice flow like water and uprightness like a never-failing stream!” : words that inspired Martin Luther King Jr in his non-violent struggle against the injustice of racist laws in the USA, and the oppression of Afro-Americans.

So no wonder that as John leapt for joy in Elizabeth’s womb when she heard the greeting of her cousin, Mary the Mother of God, so Mary, as if the very Word of God were struggling to be free within her, burst out with these words: “He has looked with favour on the lowly; He has shown the strength of his arm; He has scattered the proud in their conceit; He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly” (and if that’s not inciting political revolution and encouraging it I don’t know what is). “He has filled the hungry with good things” (and to do that, food and resources and honour and power have to be redistributed from the haves to the have nots) “and the rich he has sent empty away.”

As we know, the words of the Magnificat have inspired Christians – and non-Christians – down the ages with an unshakeable conviction that God requires his people to act justly – most recently it is the liberation theologians of South America, exemplified by the work and martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero (whom we Anglicans and non-Roman Catholics claim for ourselves as well) who was non-violently working, praying, preaching, fasting and acting for justice in a modern country that was ravaged by a savage dictatorship and where the poor were trampled down by the rich. It is these people who have seen in Jesus’s message a call for political, economic, social, legal, and racial justice.

And increasingly we are finding, as in Operation Noah, that there is in all this a call, a rallying cry, for environmental justice too, and for the right ordering of the earth’s climate and finite resources in the face of climate chaos, mass extinction of species and the depletion of the earth. This call to avert climate chaos is inspired by biblical teaching against consumerism, against the reckless pursuit of the profit motive and to the exclusion of all other more just motives, around sharing, conserving and sustainability. Against the relentless accumulation of riches regardless of the environmental or social consequences that deplete the earth.

As Archbishop Temple said in his book, “Christianity and Social Order”, everything has to be within the natural order. The purpose of production is to distribute the goods of the earth

fairly so that everybody has enough. The primary purpose of production is not the profit motive, and if that becomes the main motive, then production has gone out of its place in the natural order and profit has become its guiding principle and everything gets distorted. Of course we need profit, but that's not why we produce things, to make profit. We produce things to distribute the goods of the earth fairly.

If we look at the lives of some of those Christians in the great roll call of saints who have felt compelled by their faith to act justly and to pursue justice for their fellow men, women and communities of nations, we find a common thread running through many of their lives: Florence Nightingale in public health provision; Josephine Butler working against sex trafficking and the sexual and political exploitation of women; Trevor Huddleston fighting apartheid in South Africa; Mahatma Gandhi seeking peace and reconciliation among ethnic groups; Lord Shaftesbury fighting for just and humane working conditions and the education of the poor; William Wilberforce fighting for the abolition of slavery; Archbishop Desmond Tutu fighting apartheid, to name just a few. Such people fought to legislate for virtue, many of them working through the political system to get the laws changed. Each and every one of these people fought non-violently and politically for justice, they acted justly and helped create a more just world. Each of those people, and many others, in their own way reflected the work and the being of Jesus, whose work it is to do justice and who is justice personified. In his "Ascent of Mount Carmel" St John of the Cross takes the Christian soul on a journey from selfish, unspiritual being, through various stages of virtue, conversion, the dark night of the soul, and the dark night of the spirit until he arrives at the top of Mount Carmel where it says "Here there is no longer any way because there is no law: for the just man is a law unto himself." And the law that he reflects is the saving justice of God.

The point of spiritual formation is that we should become like Jesus and almost unconsciously do his work of justice and virtue.

Now each of these people whom I have mentioned were deeply committed Christians, each of these people had had a personal conversion to Christ and had become his disciple, each of these people were practising mystics – that is to say, Protestant or Catholic, Puritan or Anglican, Quaker, whatever, they were deeply versed in, and practised, the teaching of the spiritual masters and mistresses of the Christian faith. They were Mary the contemplative sitting at Jesus's feet and they were Martha the busy activist changing the world and its structures and helping others. The model for acting justly is that we should become, contemplative activists and active contemplatives.

Their faith in the teaching of Jesus and the Prophets inspired them to act justly to change the world, politically, socially, economically, and in many other ways such that the world worked for the good of all, such that everyone could and did flourish; such that all were provided for in a free and fair world where each person was accorded the same dignity and share of resources since all were made in the image of God and were members of one body. And their personal walk with Jesus, the forming of their characters by prayer, fasting, by

reflecting on Scripture, and the spiritual life and then immersing themselves in the world with all its injustices meant that Christ was so formed in them that they reacted violently to what they saw in the world that wasn't of Christ and they were driven to do his work in the world.

Trevor Huddleston five times a day in Sophiatown saying his office with his religious community, learning about the dignity of every human being, the justice of God, how we are all made in the image of God, how God loves us all equally, but then would walk out into Sophiatown to encounter an entire nation of people, the black community, who were denied all of that by their white political masters who felt that they were superior to them and took everything from them: education, money, jobs, training, everything. And he just exploded, reacted against it and worked to end that situation.

And according to St John of the Cross, the work of Christ is the practice of virtue and of justice, the two being inextricably linked, as Teresa of Avila, Aristotle and Aquinas make clear.

Being formed spiritually to be like Christ is to become like him, to do his work, which is to act and to be virtuous, just and righteous. And virtuous, just, righteous men and women formed by the Spirit of Christ in the world do his work of justice, bringing sight to the blind, relieving the oppression of worker and slave who have been trampled on by the rich and powerful, establishing just working conditions, fighting for the provision of public health, education, housing, jobs, care in old age, and freedom from exploitation for all and the ending of vicious gender, racist, ethnic, religious and sexual exploitation and oppression of one human being by another.

And many of them, interestingly, end up within the political system: Wilberforce an MP, Shaftesbury an MP, Martin Luther King working with the political system of the United States, challenging it to change the legislation; Josephine Butler, fighting against laws enacted in the Houses of Parliament that legislated for the appalling intrusion into women's most intimate lives to find out if they were virgins or not and if they weren't, and if they weren't married, they were branded as prostitutes and sent off to one of the brothels around the military establishments in places like Winchester where there were army camps and the government of the day felt that men needed to sow their wild oats. She read about it in Hansard and the Spirit of Christ within her rebelled against it one hot summer at her stately home and she fought a political campaign to get the law changed.

Now does God care, and we really have to answer this question, does God care that billions of people in our world live lives that are nasty, brutal and short, often as a direct result of preventable or changeable government and inter-governmental policies or as a result of governments doing nothing — structural, economic and organisational sins of commission and omission that could be rectified? Does God care? How much does he care?

What value does God place on everyone in the whole world living a life of high quality on this earth: healthy, educated, free, safe, properly resourced, with good health care, so that we all flourish? How much does God want that? Jesus came to bring us life “in all its fullness” — healing for the sick, food for the hungry, freedom for the oppressed, inclusion for the alien and an end to ethnic and racial hatred. He called this “The Kingdom of Heaven”.

Jesus taught us to pray — whenever we pray — when the disciple said “How should we pray?” — he said you should pray that God’s kingdom should come and God’s will should be done on earth as it is in heaven. Is this “Good Life” meant only for Christians? Do we only get it in heaven after we die? Was the prospect of achieving it all irrevocably rotted up by the Fall? Or did Jesus herald God’s intention to restore creation now to its pristine goodness?

For the Christian — and here the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches are very helpful in their teaching on creation — Pentecost represents, and was, an outpouring of God’s Spirit on the whole of the cosmos, charging it with, and making available, a new potential, power and resource — God’s Holy Spirit — making it capable in a new way of renewal both through the general gifts of God in creation that flow from it: the arts, sciences, medicine, technology, politics, industry, economics, education, and prayer and fasting; as well as through the special charismatic Pentecostal gifts that the Church and individual Christians receive when indwelt by God’s Spirit: gifts of peace, patience, kindness, goodness, self-control, gentleness, perseverance, faith, hope, and love and so on, which describe the way we go about acting justly politically and in other ways — as well as describing the gifts of prophecy, knowledge, preaching, teaching, spreading the good news of this kingdom, which describes how different people in the Church are gifted in different ways to act justly, to work for justice, to achieve justice. For this superhuman task we in the Church are given supernatural spiritual gifts.

And Christianity and faith is a kind of Heineken factor. It is a necessary but not sufficient element in the renewing of the earth, and if we don’t use these gifts, the earth will not be renewed. We have to ask God for them and pray that he will raise up people to use them. And many of these people who worked in the way I have described discovered that the Christian narrative, the life, suffering, passion, death and resurrection of Our Lord was the pattern of much of their work. Josephine Butler explicitly said this. Looking back in her old age, she said that she had learnt that often success is preceded by failure; that the resurrection and achievement of the goal is preceded by the apparent death of it. And often Christians are the only people who have the resources in their narrative and in their spirit to get through them.

Our life on earth is not a mere interlude prior to going to our home in heaven — a kind of waiting room. Nor is it merely a mechanism for filtering the sheep from the goats.

Scripture tells us that God intends that creation should thrive and that all people on earth should live happy, just, joyful and peaceful lives, each “sitting under their own fig tree” such that those who die before they are 100 will be considered unfortunate.

We are all members of one body — the global household — and if one member of the body is hurting, we all hurt. The toe in Europe cannot say to the nose in Africa I don't care that you're in pain, I don't care if you're cut off, you are no concern of mine. To quote the anti-slavery campaign, “Am I not your brother?” Yes you are.

To act justly is to work in Christ's name, motivated and inspired by the vision of God's kingdom of peace, justice and plenty, and the fair sharing of the resources of the earth; inspired by Christ's indwelling Spirit in us, slowly transforming us into his likeness so we can ever more fully do his work of justice and help to build a better, fairer, more just, sustainable world, and to embody that in the political system.

If the way the world and its political, economic, social and environmental systems operate works against such an outcome, if they are producing a grossly unfair outcome, then the Christian and the Church have a duty, in Archbishop William Temple's words, to say so. We have a duty to demand publicly that the experts in all these fields find a better way to work on our world. It's not our Christian duty or job to say how they should do it. We are not experts in all these fields. They are – gifted by God our creator – but it is our duty to demand a better outcome and to join them in working for a just and sustainable world for all.

End

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\*This text was produced by comparing Chris Brice's manuscript with the recording of his talk.