

The Gospel and Social Exclusion
St Catherine's College, Cambridge, 9th May 1999

Isaiah 58.6-12; Matthew 25.31- end

It's an honour for me to be contributing to this series on Christianity, Politics and Public Life and I am delighted to be here. You don't have to look too far through history, though - indeed, through very recent history, just in Britain and America - to conclude that the overlap between politics and Christianity is pretty treacherous terrain. That terrain has fascinated me since I was a student here at Emmanuel and distracted me further when I became subsequently a member of the Labour Party in East London. Many people would argue that balancing the two is an impossible task, but if we are seeking to be faithful in following Jesus then it is a task which has to be addressed.

Jesus told his followers that he was sending them out like sheep among wolves. "*Therefore*", he said, "*be shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves*". That is a pretty tough calling, but it is the calling we have been given if we have chosen to seek to follow Jesus - as Jesus' first disciples did - in the midst of messy worldly entanglement.

If the calling was just to be shrewd, that would be plain enough: to be cunning and wily, really to understand what is going on beneath the surface among those around us, to use the skills of the propagandist and the spin doctor to advance our cause.

Or if, on the other hand, the calling was just to be innocent, that would be plain enough too: to be honest and straightforward with everyone we come across, to give witness to the good news about Jesus in both our words and our actions, to put the work of God and the interests of others always ahead of our own.

But Jesus doesn't instruct his followers to choose one of those, he instructs them to do both - to be shrewd and innocent, not a bit less of one in order to be a little more of the other, wholeheartedly shrewd and innocent, both at the same time. That is our calling if we have decided to follow Jesus.

The Government's response to poverty

Poverty is a central concern in our faith and its at the heart of politics too. As a Christian my response to poverty is a test of my obedience and as a politician it is a test of my vision. I am currently responsible for taking the Welfare Reform Bill through Parliament. During that process I have heard a great deal about people's concerns for the poor and their views on the provision that we make for them. Fifty years after the establishment of the welfare state, it seems that poverty and inequality cause as much concern today as they did when the scriptures were first recorded.

Few of us experience absolute poverty - if you asked most people if they felt they were "better off" than they were 30 years ago, better off than their parents or grandparents were, I am sure that most would say that they felt richer. And there is good reason why we feel this way. Life for many people is materially better than it has ever been. The opportunities for travel and leisure have expanded. Improvements in medical care have increased life expectancy and technological progress has brought advances in to the home, the lecture hall and the workplace. For most of us - even for the average person - the poverty of our grandparents is a thing of the past.

But there is a large group which is not enjoying these advances. As Geoff Mulgan has written, *"Large sections of the population are, in effect, cut off from qualifications, jobs and safe environments"*. While many - the majority - have prospered, there is a large and growing group which has not, and has been excluded from the wider wellbeing. The Prime Minister made this problem of social exclusion the subject of his first speech after the election, when he made this pledge at the Aylesbury Estate in Southwark: *"To those who have lost hope over the last 18 years"*, he said, *"I offer them a fresh start."* It has become one of this Government's central concerns.

The statistics make a compelling case for why that is:

- Over the last twenty years average incomes have increased by 40%, but incomes for those at the very bottom have remained pretty much the same.
- The chances of those with the lowest incomes breaking out - moving up through the income bands - has been very limited.
- One in 5 children live in a household where nobody works.
- Over 2.3 million children live in a household dependent on Income Support.

The Government is introducing a host of measures to start to tackle the situation, but we are clear that we cannot do it alone. I spoke on Friday to a conference for those in my constituency providing services to asylum seekers. I was struck there, as I have been elsewhere, by the need for partnership to overcome these intractable problems of exclusion within our society.

The Churches' response to poverty

At the heart of what this Government is trying to do is the aim to create a Britain where everyone has the opportunity to play their part and contribute fully to their community. And we need change on the ground, in communities, in order to do it. Straight after the election I worked as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Minister responsible for the New Deal, the Government's flagship programme for young and long term unemployed people, and I was impressed there by the contribution being made by community groups, voluntary organisations and not least the churches.

Before the election the churches compiled an impressive and significant report, *Unemployment and the future of work*, which said, and I quote: *"It is wrong in such prosperous times as ours for men and women to be deprived for long periods of the chance to earn their living ... it is wrong to allow children to grow up where the right and duty to work are forgotten after generations of unemployment"*. There has since that report been a greater engagement and significant numbers of churches and church-based projects working towards solutions. It has made a very significant impact for the better on the quality of the New Deal programme.

Involvement carries risks, but it is crucial that the churches do get involved. For some Christians it is enough to reflect on the realities of their own experience of the love of Christ and to seek to share that with others. The Bible does provide answers to the big questions and shows us how to live our lives in relationship with God and other people. But the Bible also points us to a bigger picture. It encourages the believer to look beyond self, introducing a new set of priorities

and worldview. The implications don't just inform my private activity, but inexorably lead me to confront larger policy issues.

The reason that I first felt able to become involved in the rough and tumble of politics in East London was the fact that I was found - that my worries and insecurities have been dealt with through Jesus and so I have been set free to be concerned with problems other than merely my own. As the beneficiaries of the supreme love of Christ, we are set free to serve. That liberates us to display the most demanding sort of love - the self-sacrificing love of which Christ was the ultimate example.

God's concern for the poor

The readings this evening from Isaiah and Matthew show how far this sacrificial love is intended to go. And the point is made over and over again throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, there are 28 references to the word 'orphan'. Many of those refer also to widows and aliens - together the socially excluded of Old Testament times.

People experience many different reactions on hearing these messages and the two extreme reactions are highlighted in the passages that were read to us this evening.

The response of those who heard Isaiah is not an unusual one. In acts of so-called sacrifice rooted in pride, rather than humility, they like us succeeded only in separating themselves from God. If we respond to the needs of others with hardness then we make our sacrifice futile in the sight of God as a result. The warning to them applies to us too: "*You cannot fast as you do and expect your voice to be heard on high.*"

The faithful response is demonstrated from verse six of Isaiah 58 onwards. It challenges the reader but we are told that faithfulness will lead to the revelation of light in a dark world and a satisfaction beyond all earthly measure. God enables the believers to comprehend this way by imparting a new set of priorities. These challenge the forces in the world that have created inequality and allowed it to continue. God's values are those of an upside down Kingdom, where the victors are deemed failures by the world, where slaves are free and our enemies are loveable.

Jesus' example

As the manifestation of this upside down Kingdom, Jesus' teachings on poverty point to even greater radicalism than Isaiah's. He said "*Happy are you poor; the Kingdom of God is yours! Happy are you who are hungry now; you will be filled!*" ... "*Happy are those who are merciful to others; God will be merciful to them!*" ... "*Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children.*" The political implications of this teaching are unavoidable and God's judgement on those who ignore the needs of the poor are clear in the second of the two readings, from Matthew's gospel.

The picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and the church as His flock are familiar. There is a deep relationship between the Shepherd and His sheep. The shepherd knows His sheep by name, and the sheep hear His voice and respond accordingly. He is their protection and is willing to lay His life down for them. The relationship is not founded only on protection as He also "*guides them in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake*". And that is the starting point for Jesus' story.

Most days each of us probably experiences a call for help. And as believers we also hear the Shepherd's call to reach out and spend ourselves for those who call. In a world of seemingly infinite need it is difficult to know in practice how this works. Sometimes the dilemma is so great, we cope by disengaging ourselves from other people's suffering. And the result is not only felt by those in need, but also by those who are called to help and who don't know the joy of giving. The relational values of the Kingdom mean that we cannot turn away but as individuals the task is too large to make any sense of. But the church as a collective can begin faithfully to embrace the need that surrounds it.

Our response

It is difficult to know how to respond. Believers throughout the centuries have faced the same uncertainty. It is a well trodden path, though, and let's not overlook the achievements of those who have responded to the call in the past. John Wesley at the end of the 18th century urged his followers to establish 'strangers' friend and benevolent societies' and this led to a remarkable response from the churches with immense numbers of new, charitable organisations being formed. Their achievements were enormous and those organisations were active in all the humanitarian legislative initiatives of the 19th century.

It was a great Christian achievement to establish it as the right and duty of the state to intervene in matters of industry and commerce to protect the interests of the workers, establishing a precedent for involvement which led on to the establishment of the welfare state.

The reason why those campaigns were so effective is because they were backed by immense support - coherent, insistent, committed and well organised. Their motivation was the words of Jesus and they understood that it is not enough simply to preach to people.

For too long, churches in Britain have tended to be either the kind which preached the gospel or the kind which were involved in community action. I think there are signs now that we are moving beyond that, with churches and individual Christians having a deep commitment to the gospel and wanting both to tell others about it and to respond to it by engaging in social action and community work. I know of one small group from a church in East London which calls itself Active 58, taking their name from the section in Isaiah that we read. Through painting, gardening and befriending they are sharing light and experiencing God's presence. There are many other initiatives and some are taking people unexpectedly into political engagement.

For too long our churches have been inward looking, largely comfortable and contented. Patchily, hesitantly but increasingly our churches have begun to engage again, and Britain's political agenda is just beginning to benefit as a result. The most impressive consequence so far, I think, has been the Jubilee 2000 campaign for the relief of unsustainable third world debt at the Millennium. It is a secular campaign but rooted in the teaching of the Bible, and it has been taken up with great enthusiasm across a wide spectrum of churches. It is the churches which have provided the backbone for the campaign and forced the issue on to the politicians' agenda. It would not have been there otherwise. And the 50,000 people who turned up to lobby the G8 meeting at Birmingham last June were overwhelmingly from the churches - just like the great church-based campaigns for reform of the last century. They're rallying again in London next month.

As members of the Church, we work to bring the good news of being found in Jesus to individuals, but to bring it also to our society whose system needs to be rescued and renewed as well. We are shrewd and innocent. The love of Jesus and the power of God's Spirit motivate us to work with hope and realism for God's Kingdom, even though we know we shall only see it in perfection when this world is transformed into the new heavens and the new earth which God will bring about in the future. We work alongside others towards liberty and true humanity, knowing that those things are to be achieved ultimately in being found by God through Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

I hope we are going to see more and more church contributions in our local communities to tackle the problems of social exclusion. Our faith demands it. Believers before us have made the sacrifice and laid the foundations. The Government is providing the framework for churches to do it in. And the impact of the Church working for social inclusion can be powerful. Church-based projects can bring effectiveness, because of the commitment which they bring and the credibility of churches in their communities.

Creating a new Britain requires including many who have been excluded in the past. If we are to succeed, our churches - faithful to the gospel which the Bible has shown us - need to be key players again in the future.

Then my favour will shine on you like the morning sun, and your wounds will be quickly healed. I will always be with you to save you; my presence will protect you on every side. When you pray, I will answer you. When you call to me I will respond.