



Archbishop of Canterbury

‘An exposition of the biblical principals and gospel imperative on the mission of the Church in Society’

Summary of address

TEAM Conference
South Africa

2007

Major texts from the Bible

Jeremiah 22.16, 24.7, 31.34.

Deuteronomy 5.2-3.

Micah 6.6-9

I Corinthians 11. 20-34, 12.20-27

Matthew 28.18-20

John 11.51-52.

1. Old Testament principles

Jer. 22.16 (Good News Bible)

‘He gave the poor a fair trial, and all went well with him. That is what it means to know the LORD.’

Compare I Chronicles 28.9, Jer.24.7, 31.34, Hosea 2.20: (a) knowing the Lord is having understanding of the Law, (b) knowing the Lord is what happens at the time of the restoration of Israel. Fairness for the poor becomes a sign of God’s promise, an anticipation of the state when his will is clearly done on earth.

Fairness for the poor not the only principle of the Law, but a central one – why? Because the essence of the law of Israel is that no-one is forgotten or invisible. All Israel receives/ hears the law (Jewish legend that all Jewish souls throughout history were present at Mount Sinai – c.f. Deut.5.3). All are the objects of God’s commitment (covenant); therefore no-one is outside relation to God, and no-one can be forgotten.

The good ruler in Israel is one who (as in Jeremiah) observes this: he knows the Lord because he is committed to sharing the Lord's perspective – for which no-one is superfluous and no-one is invisible. He acts out the covenant. So when the decision makers of a society act, speak and legislate on the basis that no-one is forgotten, there is a foretaste of God's purpose being fulfilled.

2. New Testament principles

I Corinthians 12.26

'If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it.'

The NT announces that the end of all things has come to be near at hand – God's final purpose is being uncovered through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. He is redefining what it is to be the people of God; in relation to him, all find their real destiny and freedom. So he is now the equivalent of the Law itself: he is what guarantees that no-one is to be forgotten. The community around Jesus shows what things will be like at the end of everything – a community in which each lives for the good of all.

So meanwhile, in history, Christian believers try to live so as to show this – and when one is deprived, all are diminished.

Does this apply only to community of Christians? No, it applies first to Church so that Church may challenge and transform world – as, in the OT, Israel is covenant community so that world may see what covenant law and justice are. For Christian, any human deprivation is a diminishment, because any human being is potentially a member of the Body of Christ and so cannot be forgotten, whether or not they are actually members by baptism.

And above all, Church says to world: 'the form of human community that is ultimately in accord with God's purpose is one in which this principle applies'. Hence the community gathered around the Lord's Table as sign of future – all gather to be fed, all are willing to give precedence to each other (I Cor.11.20-22); it's not the possession of anyone, not something that serves any group's interest, but is – like the sacrifice it represents, for all. There are no 'gated communities' in the Kingdom. There are no communities exempted from involvement in the loss or trauma of others.

3. General and conclusion

Biblical imperative is not a code of practice or a simple order; it is revelation of God's character and will as something always seen in relation to a community that lives by law – law understood as guarantee that no-one is left invisible. Culminates in revelation of new creation/ new community that is created by Jesus' cross and resurrection. Compare Ephesians, with its stress on God's purpose being made known in all this – again, knowledge of God inseparable from creation of fairness and attention to needs of each.

Church faced with MDG's is bound to be asking, 'Who is being forgotten?' But this also means positively that it must be involved in creating participation and empowerment; it must be an agent for people at every level to discover what they can do. It resists both a culture of indifference and injustice and a culture of dependency. Its mobilising of its own community resources (Mothers' Union, microcredit initiatives, educational work, etc.) is inseparable from advocacy on the global level.

It must also put question to prosperous societies of West and North – have you understood that you are deprived and dehumanised by a global situation of injustice, a system that

tolerates the idea of superfluous people who are allowed to remain invisible? St Augustine says that the problem of injustice is not only the suffering of the oppressed but the corruption of the mind and heart of the oppressor. Working for MDG's is not simply working for the needy as a separate category of human beings, but working for the healing of all, including the healing of those who don't see the problem.

To go back to start – the Church is in the business of calling all to 'know the Lord': to announce that he has made his nature and purpose clear and that we are summoned and enabled to share his loving and creative perspective on the world he has made as we work towards a human family where no-one is forgotten.

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