

TRANSFORMING THE UNJUST STRUCTURES OF SOCIETY

Martin Camroux

Amos 5:24 “Let Justice Roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream

I think we just could be in those historic moments when something amazing is about to happen in the world. The Berlin wall is breached and communism collapses in Europe. Nelson Mandela is released from prison and apartheid breaks up. This could be the year when we begin to make poverty history.

All my lifetime world poverty has been real and terrible. One of the formative books of by student days was this – Colin Morris’s “Include Me Out” – is there any one here who remembers it? Colin was a missionary in Zambia. And then one day a man dropped dead not a 100 yards from his front door. The Pathologist said he’s died of hunger. In his shrunken stomach were a few leaves and what appeared to be a ball of grass. And nothing else. According to the police the man’s total possessions in life were a pair of shorts, a ragged shirt and an empty biro pen.

And the same day through his post came one of those endless stream of reports on Anglican-Methodist unity. And Colin Morris says he thought how unimportant so many of the churches concerns are compared with the catastrophe of world hunger.

That was 35 years. In that period more people have moved out of poverty than in any time in the history. In India, in China, in South Korea, in Singapore, in Taiwan, there have been amazing economic revolutions. It came home to me when I went to Taiwan last year. 35 years ago was similar to that of Africa – now it’s similar to Europe. Swish department stores, young people playing computer games. I went into a hospital in Tainin which had more modern equipment than St Helier. Of course there is still much to be achieved. There are still many desperately poor people. There are still appalling sweat-shop factories. But compared with 35 years the world has changed. Life expectancy has increased by 20 years illiteracy has been cut in half. Over the last 20 years the number living on less than \$ a day has fallen by 200 million.

But the reality of world poverty remains. Development has been uneven. In the last ten years there are 20 countries whose living standards have declined, most of them in Africa. One in five of the human race, 1.2 billion people, live on less than \$1 a day with a life expectancy not much beyond the early 40s, a lack of access to literacy. Half of humanity has no sanitation; over a billion don’t have access to clean water. Millions of children don’t get a chance of education or have any basic access to healthcare. 500,000 women a year die in childbirth. One in five of us are living in those sorts of conditions

To be frank I don't there's ever been in my life-time when governments have taken this very seriously. Of course there have been good development ministers. I think of Judith Hart, Lydia Chalker, Claire Short. But essentially it's always been a low priority. The world spends 50b a year on development – its spend 350billion on subsidizing its agriculture.

Just at the moment that may be changing. When the G8 finance ministers met in London last week the results were frankly astonishing.

On Debt

It was agreed to 100 per cent debt cancellation of outstanding obligations IMF, World Bank and African Development Bank. 18 Countries will benefit from this immediately.

Aid

EU aid is being doubled between 2004 and 2010. Both Germany and Italy committed themselves (for the first time) to reach 0.7% by 2015. We are committed to reach it by 2013

Trade

There was a quite new commitment to establish a timetable for the elimination of all trade-distorting export support in agriculture.

HIV/Aids

A commitment to strengthen health systems, to develop new vaccines and offer universal access for Aids treatment by 2010.

Now of course we need to be cautious about all this. Two questions. Firstly when it comes to it will the actions meet the words? Will the US really stop dumping subsidised cotton on Africa? Will Europe reform the CAP?

Second question: Will the Aid really be used to combat poverty or will it stick in the hands of corrupt regimes? For every pound that Africa spends each repaying interest on its debts - £1.40 is salted out of the countries into bank deposit by corrupt members of the elite. It was good to see South Africa dismiss its Vice-President this week for corruption. There are a lot of other African politicians who need to be shown this door as well.

But we are in one of those moments when something is possible – there are amazing doors of possibility. There is a door of opportunity we have never seen before. And why?

I think we are fortunate to have Gordon Brown as Chancellor. He is a son of the manse. The Christian faith has influenced by which he lives. But he is not St Gordon. He would

not be taking this up unless he saw political reasons for doing so. The truth is people power works. 2 million people sent texts messages trying to order tickets for the Live 8 concert in Hyde Park. Hundreds of thousands of people have sent postcards to Tony Blair or the White House. A million people may be in people. Today for the first time there are votes to lose if you are not active against world poverty.

And how has that change come about? Well Gordon Brown says its couldn't have happened without the churches. And I believe he is right. This has been part of a campaign the churches have waged over many years. It has helped change British politics. And it may play a part in changing the world.

And it is right that we should have played this part because changing the world is one of the things churches are here to do. Look at those other great changes I mentioned. The end of apartheid – think of the part that Desmond Tutu played in that. Or the end of Communism – think of the impact of John Paul 11. Or think Martin Luther King and racial justice, William Wilberforce and Slavery, Donald Soper and peace.

Today we are thinking of the 4th mark of mission – transforming the unjust structures of society. You can see it in Amos. “Let Justice Roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”. Or you can see it in Isaiah “Seek justice. Rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow”. Or you can see it in Jesus” He has sent me to proclaim release to captives, to let the broken victims go free”.

The Christian moral life begins with how we act to those we meet everyday; it goes on to seek the good of all.

In this Church that has meant the Jubilee Debt Campaign, Commitment for Life, Christian Aid, Amnesty International, the Refugee network, caring for the homeless. And then there are particular causes like the recent gambling bill. It's a vital part of any churches life to be responsive to the world outside.

Martin Luther King put it like this: "The gospel at its best deals with the whole man, not only his soul but his body, not only his spiritual well-being but his material well-being. Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial".

We're at a crossroads. We'll either make the world more just and more fair or it will become more and more bitterly divided and conflict-ridden. If we succeed we can make extreme poverty history. Or hunger may continue and diseases may - HIV/AIDS is spreading in India, Russia, China - it's not just confined to Africa. There's environmental degradation, and we'll either deal with that by sharing the resources of the planet more fairly, and be more responsible with the consumption in which we engage, or we'll all be in trouble. This is a time for those who are inspired by the teachings of Jesus Christ to mean it, to take it into the mainstream, to move our societies and to move our world

forward. “Let Justice Roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

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