Talking Cents

Reciprocity and Hope!

Talking Cents listens out for religious and political thought that carries the possibility of justice for all. It listens out for values upon which new economic and financial paradigms might be built. We have appreciated developing Catholic Social Teaching, the ten day ecumenical Governance and Economic Management workshops in Mexico in August 2018 where characteristics of alternate trade architectures and agreements were explored and the Christian Social Justice Conference in Auckland, 1-2 November 2018.

Ecumenically, denominationally and in inter-faith relationships, there is a serious questioning of the mindset, structures and policies of neo-liberalism. But as we move towards new possibilities, pessimism, thirsting for economic growth and finding new ways of working together, will need to be addressed.

Widespread feelings of powerlessness and pessimism are explored in the article The politics of powerlessness (Bruce Davis) (https://theecologist.org/2018/oct/29/politics-powerlessness). This article notes that: 'This crisis of confidence is rooted in a post-crash economy in which 'progress' is no longer the experience of the majority ... Politicians and the powerful are also falling prey to this pessimism ... We have the power to constitute a finance system that no longer thinks purely about its own stability, but which takes account of the costs of climate change and social volatility ... All businesses, financial or otherwise, need a new social contract that aligns their goals with those we have for society' (pp 2-4).

An Unquenchable Thirst for More: faith and economic growth argues that most of our language about economic growth is an imprisoning picture: 'For some in the global South, far from being part of the solution, the dogmatic pursuit of economic growth is part of the problem: a form of neo-liberal globalisation which has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God's creation ... It could be time to abandon the goal of endless growth and increasing consumption - at least for those who are already prosperous by global standards and seek to be more just and efficient at sharing existing resources and wealth' (https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/about-us/unquenchable, pp 2-3).

Possible roles for the church are described as 'developing new vision and fostering the kind of radical imagination, shaped by faith, that we believe can help create the world anew' (p 4).

Two recent Anglican Archbishops of Canterbury have explored the involvement of the church in the transformation of society. Between them, they reflect commitment to social justice in the Anglo-Catholic and Evangelical wings of the Church of England.

In 1993, Rowan Williams wrote a short essay entitled Prayer and Theology, ten years before he became the Archbishop of Canterbury. In it, he explored pre-requisites for a church of integrity if it is to have a discourse with society.

Wendy Dackson is an ethnically Jewish lay
member of the American Episcopalian church. Her Doctorate in theology was from Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 2012 she summarised the pre-requisites in Rowan William's essay as:

1. It (the church) does not conceal its true agenda but rather truly talks about what it says it is talking about;
2. It is open to genuine response from the concerned parties, rather than a prescribed or pre-determined one;
3. It declines to take “God's view” or claim to have a “total perspective”;
4. It provides an “imaginative resource for confronting the whole range of human complexity.”

(‘Anglicanism and Social Theology’, Wendy Dackson, Anglican Theological Review, 94:4 pp 633-634)

Similar humility, openness, challenge and hope is expressed by the present Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. He speaks from the setting of a possible Brexit, but hopes his reflections can be useful in other contexts. He believes our search for the transformation of society will need a generous and hospitable meta-narrative within which competing truths can be held' (Re-Imagining Britain: Foundations for Hope, Bloomsbury Press, 2018, p 17).

Archbishop Justin suggests we will need relationships of identity, love and reciprocity:

- with courage, creativity and a healthy competition of ideas (pp 43-46);
- committed to the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity within, across and between nations (pp 38-41);
- committed to creating communities of provision (characterised by sharing), universal destination of goods (all that exists is for all – the living and all who are to come) and gratuity (there is more than enough for all) (pp 32-37);
- committed to nations and communities of stability, resilience and hope (rather than optimism), and sustainability under pressure (pp 47-53).

On the 19-20 October 2018, a hui entitled Alternate and Progressive Trade and Investment Models was held in Auckland. A similar search for values ran through the hui. Leona Menghany of Medicins Sans Frontieres participated in one of the panels. She reminded the hui about the Maori Proverb: Naku te rourou naku te rourou ka ora Rau ai te iwi: With your food basket and my food basket the people will thrive. She suggested it provided a new way to negotiate trade agreements. For example, New Zealand and Indian dairy farmers could meet face to face to find policies that would offer 'flourishing' to the farmers and peoples of both countries. Through such relationships of reciprocity, imbalances between the North and the South, between the East and the West, and between Indigenous Peoples and new forms of colonialism, might be addressed.

As we seek new paradigms for justice we need to reflect on the difference between:

- hope and optimism;
- the radical sharing of wealth and the commodification of housing, health and education;
- the power of the many and powerlessness of individuals;
- movements for change and negative populism;
- new authentic forms of democracy and autocratic leadership;
- the status of Indigenous Peoples and nationalism;
- advocacy and protectionism.

The church can offer hope to the societal issues of the day if it is committed to relationships of identity, love and reciprocity that challenge the status quo. Then the church will be able to participate with integrity in the common search for human and planetary flourishing.