

Building the New Jerusalem Amidst the Cuts

Isaiah is one of the most powerful and influential Old Testament voices for Christians. He speaks of both the birth of the Messiah (Isaiah 7:14 and 9:2,6-7) in words that have shaped Advent and Christmas, and of God's suffering servant (Isaiah 52 -53) in passages that colour our understanding of Christ's sacrifice for us through his passion and crucifixion. But Isaiah also shares his vision, imparted by God, of what the world should be like. And this vision of the New Jerusalem, of the world as God wants it to be, is shaped by justice (rather than 'fairness'), by peace, by compassion, and by shared abundance (Isaiah 55-56, 58 and 60-62).

This is in sharp contrast to the way we organise our affairs. Economic policies influenced by these principles would surely not major on cutting the benefits of poor people while not increasing taxes for the majority? For here we are, penalising the tenants whose rent is paid by Housing Benefit with caps that will fall most harshly on families with more than two children, rather than capping the inflated rents which landlords have been able to charge, secure in the knowledge that Local Authorities have a statutory duty to accommodate homeless families and to avoid placing them in overcrowded homes. The Government argument about tenants in receipt of thousands of pounds a year in Housing Benefit applies to a tiny number of cases (the average Housing Benefit payment is less than £200 per week) and even then the money goes to the landlords, not to support people living in luxury you or I could only dream of. So the just/Isaiah approved/Christian response would be to cap rents (politically unpalatable and as much of a gamble in terms of the outcome as many of the other policies proposed by the Coalition Government in the housing sphere), or (and this appears to be the direction of recent policy developments) to apply other sticks and carrots to encourage the reduction of rents alongside the capping of benefits.

So, given that, as a nation, we have agreed to reduce the national deficit in order to progress more strongly in future, what is the alternative? First we need to take seriously the idea that the post WWII consensus is dead and grasp this opportunity to develop a new justice consensus. The most benign view of the current situation is that there is scope to develop a new consensus from the grass roots community organising/Big Society activity combined with the theological underpinning of Catholic Social Teaching. Sceptics view the combination of rolling back the responsibilities of the state and increased dependence on local volunteer based solutions with dismay. It is vital that justice and peace activists engage with this process that is underway on our doorsteps. We have a responsibility to speak up for and open channels for the voices of the poor and marginalised in our society, as well as a responsibility to stand up for the tenets of faith and the idea of the Common Good. The result may not be the New Jerusalem but it will be a lot better than if we stay on the sidelines.

Second we need to live our beliefs; particularly concerning environmental sustainability, sensible frugality, the option for the poor, and shared abundance. This is simply to urge us to do more of the same; to model the possible and to share our experiences with others in our families, our parishes and our communities. Some of it is about the practice of daily life and the choices we make (about food, about fuel, about transport), but some of it is about responding to need (helping homeless people, providing food and support for migrants and refugees), and some of it is about taking a political stance (contacting MPs and councillors, signing petitions, marching...).

Only if we Christians ourselves, as Isaiah exhorts, begin to turn to the Lord and follow his ways, can we expect to have any influence or impact on the world at large.