

the year of the lord's favour

a sermon preached on the

Third Sunday after Epiphany

24 January 2016

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by fr david moore, vicar

the lections: Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10, Psalm 19, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, Luke 4:14-21

The Primates of the Anglican Communion have recently suspended the province of The Episcopal Church from all decision making for the next three years.¹ The published justification for this bizarre action is what the thirty-something male archbishops call 'painful differences' over attitudes about relationships between homosexual persons. What they don't say is that there are relatively few Bible verses specifically concerned with the matter. In fact, there are no emphatically-unambiguous specific Bible verses about 'homosexuality'² – just a handful of highly contested verses.

Certainly, the Primates' statement does include some other important subjects. And in the same week Archbishop Philip Freier wrote about building an economy that works for the common good.³ But the only immediate action the Primates as a group took – and punitive at that – effectively guarantees what will be remembered of their meeting. The Primates have therefore communicated to the world that the most pressing matter for Anglicans worldwide is its disagreements over homosexuality. Indeed, their regressive attitude towards homosexual persons is precisely what was reported by news media.⁴ Whether we like it or not, this is how we are regarded. We give consent to homophobia by our silence. And it is *we* – collectively-speaking, as 'Anglican Communion' – who are doing it to ourselves. We can't blame communists, or atheists, or even 'IS' for this. The situation in which the Anglican Communion finds itself painfully illuminates the tragic state of affairs facing the Christian churches generally.⁵

I wonder why we Christians are best known for our rigid and regressive attitudes about sexuality?

This week the international welfare agency Oxfam reported that 62 individuals own as much of the world's wealth as the poorest half of the world's population.⁶ That's 62 people owning as much as 3.6 billion people. Moreover, that's a six-fold concentration compared with 5 years ago when 388 individuals owned half the world's wealth. During this period the wealth of those 62 people has increased by 44%, while the wealth of the bottom half has dropped by 41%. According to the OECD, this economic inequity is reflected globally, the gap between the lowest paid and the highest paid steadily increasing in recent years.⁷

Those of you who have been praying the Morning Prayer office this week will have read this from the prophet Jeremiah:

For scoundrels are found among my people;
they *take over the goods of others*...
Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of treachery;
therefore they have *become great and rich*,
they have *grown fat and sleek*...
they do not defend the *rights of the needy*...
For from the least to the greatest of them,
everyone is *greedy for unjust gain*.⁸

Those familiar with the Bible will know that these are just a few of the many hundreds of verses in the Bible expressing concern for justice: specifically, for *economic* justice, for the needs of the poor; and the

¹ See Primates' Meeting Final Statement 16 January 2016, <http://www.anglicanprimate.org.au/news/primates-final-statement/>

² See Gareth Moore, *A Question of Truth: Christianity and Homosexuality*, London: Continuum, 2003.

³ Philip Freier, 'Building an economy that works for the common good', *The Age*, 16 January 2016, <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/philip-freier-head-20160114-gm6e8v.html>

⁴ 'Anglican Church leaders penalise US church over same-sex marriage stance as apology issued to gay, lesbian followers', *ABC*, 16 January 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-01-16/anglicans-penalise-us-church-over-gay-marriage-stance/7092632>

⁵ For example, see the lobby group, Australian Christian Lobby: <http://www.acl.org.au>

⁶ *ABC News*, 'Richest 62 people own as much as half the world's population: Oxfam', 19 January 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-01-18/oxfam-uses-global-wealth-report-to-highlight-inequality/7096688>

⁷ 'Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising', *OECD*, 2011, <http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/49499779.pdf>

⁸ Jeremiah 5:26,27,28, 6:13

responsibility of God's people to make economic systems just. Contrary to the impression given by the Primates, the Bible has precious little to say about sex – but is intensely concerned with economic injustice.

The Jesus 'full of the Holy Spirit',⁹ who emerges from forty days of testing in the wilderness begins his public ministry by citing familiar verses from Hebrew prophecy:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.¹⁰

This is clearly Jesus' self-understood mandate. To 'preach good news',¹¹ then, is primarily a matter of justice – specifically economic justice. Good news to the *poor*. Release to *captives*. Recovery of sight to the *blind*. The *oppressed* liberated. The year of the Lord's favour.

'Year of the Lord's favour' would have been immediately recognised by Jesus' audience in the hometown synagogue.¹² It refers to the Biblical teaching on Jubilee:¹³ the return, every 50 years, of all the land and property to the poor, that which had been taken from them by the rich. The true purpose of the restoration of the Jerusalem Temple – and the keeping of the holy day as described in today's reading from Nehemiah – is fundamentally about the restoration in Israel of the principles of Sabbath and Jubilee. As Archbishop Philip wrote: "To paraphrase Jesus' teaching about the Sabbath, the economy was made for people, not people for the economy".

Jesus – faithful to the long line of Jewish prophets – clearly understands his 'anointing', that word with the same root as 'Christ',¹⁴ as a matter of *Jubilee*. The 'good news' becoming visible in both Crib and Nazareth synagogue, then – in the 'Word made flesh' – is news of God's desire for an economy characterised by justice. To be 'filled with the power of the Spirit' has nothing to do with the Christian sexual neurosis, nor with caricatured so-called 'charismatic' gestures. Rather, it's the power of Love which so values and dignifies all persons equally, as to be most preoccupied with the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed, so as to work for an economic system manifesting the year of the Lord's favour. For, as St Paul grasped: "If one member of the body suffers, all suffer together with it".¹⁵

So I wonder why we Christians are best known for our rigid and regressive attitudes about sexuality?

Being baptised into this good news consists of new life in the Jubilee way of Love. Living into this Jubilee **εὐαγγέλιον** *evangelion* will affect every decision we make – but, as Jesus teaches us, especially the economic ones.

We all want a 'return on our investment'. But why do we want to earn more interest than is sufficient to satisfy our true needs, more than somebody else? We all want 'a bargain'. But the way of Jubilee will cause us to stop and ask the discomfiting questions: why is this consumer item so cheap, who is losing in order that I can be a 'winner', what is the true price that I am not prepared to pay, and at whose expense? Such an examination of our attitudes to 'economy' could be readily multiplied to every aspect of life.

Eucharist is communion in the way of Jubilee: communion with the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed, communion with the 'indispensable weaker members of the body'.¹⁶ To make Eucharist is to participate in God's Jubilee economy.

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⁹ Luke 4:1,14

¹⁰ Luke 4:18-19

¹¹ Luke 4:18 **εὐαγγελισασθαι** *euangelisasthai* 'to preach good news'

¹² Luke 4:16

¹³ See Leviticus 25. Also 'Jubilee!' in Ched Myers et al, "Say to This Mountain" **Mark's Story of Discipleship**, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996, pp22-30; Ched Myers, **The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics**, Washington: The Church of the Saviour, 2001.

¹⁴ Luke 4:18 **εχρισεν** *echrisen* 'he anointed'; **Χριστον** *Christon* 'Christ'

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:26

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:22