

‘Let Justice Flow: Transforming Lives!’ World Development Appeal 2013

Theological reflections

Under the banner ***Let Justice Flow***, the World Development Appeal is continuing to take as its theme the prophetic call for a rebuilding of just and rightly ordered relationships, within and among the human communities living together on this earth. This is a call which is deeply embedded within the biblical traditions, and it echoes the 2013 theme of the ***Fit for Purpose*** programme adopted by the General Assembly, that the Church is called to be ***a place of transformation*** within its own culture and context.

Woven throughout both the Old and New Testaments is a hard won reflection on human trust in God which suggests that in order to grasp more fully what you claim to believe, you must simply embrace and live that belief, even as you continue to yearn for a deeper understanding of what it will mean, and cost. In other words, it is in the hard slog of the life of faith that the deeper understanding one longs for will come.

And so when God gives the Torah to the people of Israel, Moses reads the book of the covenant to the people, and they respond: *All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient (Exodus 24.7)*. The doing comes first, and only then the obedience born of true hearing, and understanding.

In a similar way, Jesus says: *Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own (John 7.17)*. The teaching, in other words, will only be fully grasped in all its power once we have begun to live it in our own lives.

This is what the nations in Matthew 25 are so shocked to discover. It is those who did not spend their time wondering about the limits of their obligation to others, but who simply took it upon themselves to become a neighbour to those who were in need of one, who come to understand afterwards that all the time they had been in the presence of Christ.

A paper prepared by the Church in Society Forum earlier this year, with a view to highlighting some of the issues church leaders might wish to raise in the context of the G8 summit in June, pointed out one of the guiding assumptions of the Good Friday Agreement that remains to be fully developed. This is the assumption that in a society with a recent history of violent conflict, a commitment to address identified issues of social justice can be crucial in enabling those who continue to bear the scars of conflict, or reflect its polarization, to begin to create some workable common ground.

Our partners in this year’s World Development Appeal challenge us to embrace such a commitment in our own context, even as we support them in doing so in theirs. One of the

challenges Christians in Rwanda have faced, in the wake of the unspeakable devastation of the 1994 genocide, has been to ask themselves how much it is necessary for people to agree with one another, or even to know what they themselves think about what happened, before they can begin to work together.

Rwandan Christians, living in a society whose infrastructure had been completely destroyed, did not have the luxury of time in which to wrestle with these questions. They were faced, as the people of the nations also were in Matthew's gospel, with the urgent need of those around them for a neighbour. And in working together to become neighbours to those whose lives had been shattered, they began to create a new context for their own continuing lives.

Their practical and hard-working courage challenges us in another respect, as well. In light of the overarching theme of this year's Appeal, *Let Justice Flow*, and in light of the prophetic call to **do** justice, perhaps we need to make sure that what we mean by *justice* is shaped by a biblical imagination, and does not simply reflect the norms of the culture around us.

The **doing** of justice, in that prophetic understanding, is the putting right, the right ordering, of all human relationships, with others and with the whole created earth. In a post-conflict situation, this will necessarily involve an element of accountability to one another, and a willingness to be held responsible for one's own action, or failure to act.

But the doing of justice can never end there, because relationships can only be put right on new terms, terms that acknowledge the extent to which we have become different people because of what we have experienced. If we seek simply to reconstruct the society or the relationships we had before, we render ourselves powerless in the face of the future.

Furthermore, if we fall into the trap of requiring that others change before we are prepared to do so, and if we refuse to accept that none of us can anymore claim to be what we once were, we deny ourselves the possibility of a new flourishing. And we forget that the justice of God offers us a new model for re-ordering our life together, one in which the burden does not fall on those who are least able to bear it, but is taken up by those who can.

There is a story told about Fiorello LaGuardia, former mayor of the city of New York, and a judge by profession. One day, in court, and in frustration at having to impose a fine on yet another person who had stolen food to feed her children during the Great Depression, LaGuardia announced that this time he was also imposing a fine on all those sitting in the courtroom: lawyers, journalists, and members of the public. *I am fining you each 50 cents*, he said. *Your crime is your failure to be outraged that this is a society in which some people have to steal food in order to feed their children.*

Our partners in this year's Appeal ground their work in the realisation that Christian communities are called to be places of costly transformation even as they continue to struggle with all the pain and injustice of the society in which they live, and from which they themselves have suffered. And it is only in opening themselves to this costly transformation, to this refusal to be complacent, that they will enable God to use their lives to transform the lives of others.

May their work inspire ours, and may our support for them be generous, that all our lives might be transformed, and flourish, as we learn what it means to **Let Justice Flow**.