Divine Economics

Michaelmas 2019

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Revd. Dr Simon Perry

Economics and Forgiveness

13th October, 2019

Some of you will find it difficult not to complete the following sentence – at least in your heads. 'A Lannister always…'. Pays his debts. It sounds quite simply, like the right thing any trustworthy person would do. 'Paying your debts', sounds bizarrely uncontentious, as a basic moral assumption. People should pay … their … debts… But what if we live in a culture that has unwittingly sanctified debt? What if our culture was so saturated in an ideology of debt, that it has come to define who we are? What if debt has become so normalised, we can no longer assess whether or not it is moral?

Perhaps one of the most iconic images of liberation from this entire debt-shaped culture, is the Statue of Liberty, at the foot of which is a poem 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.' The poem, by Emma Lazarus, is actually borrowing from Bronze Age pledges of debt-amnesty. The word used for freedom is derived from the Mesopotamian word for debt-forgiveness. That is the kind of liberty celebrated by the Statue of Liberty.

Even more explicit is the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia – said to have rung out to proclaim independence across the land, when the US declared its independence. But, once again, is the Leviticus text we heard this evening: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof." The word for Liberty here, is again rooted in that ancient Mesopotamian word for debt-cancellation.

It found its way into Hebrew law and ethics from ancient Sumerian and Babylonian cultures that regularly pronounced nationwide debt cancellations. Whenever a new ruler took the throne, or in times of war of famine, ancient Mesopotamian kings from as early as the Fourth millennium before Christ, issued nationwide debt cancellations. All personal debts were wiped clean, all land that had been forfeit to pay debts was returned to the original owners and all debt-slaves were set free. However - the kings who issued these debt amnesties were not acting out of kindness, but self-interest.

The danger of allowing debts to grow unregulated was simply that creditors would eventually gain sufficient power to establish themselves as an oligarchic class with the potential to challenge the authority of the king. Since common people fleeing debt-slavery would abandon their land to avoid being enslaved, kings would lose the taxes farmed from that land, they would lose the citizens who made up their armies, and they would lose the manpower required for public building projects.

Failing to cancel a nation's debts would weaken the king's authority over the nation. On the other hand, creditors would amass debt-slaves of their own, acquire lands formerly under royal control, and be capable of raising mercenary armies financed by their accumulated wealth. This, ultimately, is what happened – time after time, empire after empire. And it is what led to the collapse of empire after empire – right up to the fall of Rome.

Widening the gap between emerging creditor elites and the people of land had created widespread debt-slavery, depleted the population, and concentrated money into the hands of a tiny minority with the privilege to employ tax avoidance strategies. This in turn resulted in the breakdown of the money economy. The clearest accounts of this collapse are offered by Roman historians (Diodorus, Dionysius, Livy and Plutarch). Again and again, they lament how

Rome's oligarchic creditor elites impoverished and disenfranchised their populations to the point where they eventually crumbled under the weight of their own greed.

Debt cancelation was a widespread practice in the ancient near east. It is confirmed by the Rosetta Stone – whose text is pictured on our Term Card. Lots of people know, of course, that the Rosetta Stone has helped modern translators to decipher ancient languages. But what the text actually says – that escapes most people's attention. It is, in fact, a decree of debt cancellation.

The Jewish tradition of 'Jubilee' is rooted in this Ancient Near Eastern narrative of debt amnesty, and a key theme running through Hebrew Scripture was the nation's widespread failure to honour that tradition: Mosaic laws legislate debt amnesties and warn of the consequences of failing to issue them; Prophets demand that rulers honour them; Histories show how the great calamities to befall the nation were ultimately a result of failure to practice them. The Jewish contribution to the tradition of debt cancellation was to take the decision out of the hands of rulers, and codify them in law – making them a regular event.

Every 49 years, everyone in Israel would be given a clean slate, debts slaves are freed, family land is returned, all debts are cancelled. And although 49 years is a once-in-a-lifetime event – the weekly observance of Sabbath – every 7 days – is a constant reminder that however privileged or tough your current circumstances might be, they are by no means permanent. You and your family will not forever be trapped in debt. That is the primal promise of Sabbath.

Israel worshipped a God of gratuitous pan-dimensional forgiveness. Debt-amnesty is a fundamental and indispensable dimension of that forgiveness. If God himself has forgiven all the sin/debt of an individual, how can that individual remain in financial debt to a wealthy Israelite? If a Palestinian peasant is granted a 'clean slate' by Yahweh, how can any Israelite creditor fail to do likewise (at the very least on those jubilaic occasions required by Torah)? It may well be for this reason that for Luke, the petition 'forgive us our sins requires forgiving 'everyone indebted to us' (11:4).

This is also the precise logic of the Matthean parable of the unmerciful servant (Mt 18:21-35). Forgiveness of sin, when granted by this God, delegitimises any economic credit one might enjoy, and delegitimizes any economic debt one might have to a fellow Israelite.

If this is the case, then the wealthy creditors of Israel are likely to oppose not only Jesus' explicit teaching about wealth, but also his seemingly innocuous teaching on forgiveness. Those who oppose that teaching are highly likely to have financial motives for so doing. When Jesus initiated an era of forgiveness, his teaching not only undermined this religious and legal status quo, but threatened economic and political norms that were widely and deeply treasured. His good news to the poor was not good news to everyone, and the ferocity of the opposition he faced is hardly surprising. From the political perspective, Jesus was killed because of his economic views.

The forgiveness Jesus advocated was (AND STILL IS) a dangerously aggressive practice: liberation, whatever form it takes, requires that formidable forces (in the political world or the human psyche) simply let go of highly treasured assets (be they economic resources or dependency relationships).

In a world saturated with the ideology of debt, it is hardly surprising that this interpretation of Scripture is rarely heard. But to speak about forgiveness without speaking of its economic dimension is to ignore the core dynamic of forgiveness.

It may be the same reason that the Statue of Liberty both symbolises debt-cancellation and stands over a nation, seventy percent of whom today are in a state of serious economic debt.

Some even argue that the liberty bell has cracked because of the hypocrisy of its text is being ignored by the very people who venerate it.

What impact these texts might have on us today, is a question we will revisit throughout the rest of this term.

Intercession: Forgiveness and Debt

God of freedom, of liberty, of forgiveness in all its fullness – we worship you as fallen people in a fallen world.

Forgive us for compartmentalising your gifts to us – forgive us for judging people according to their economic status, for our lack of grace in relating to others, for separating spiritual truth from practical reality.

In a world submerged in so much debt, show us what it means to be a people who live and breathe forgiveness.

Where we are ignorant of the harsh realities faced by others, open our eyes to the world as it is. Help us to measure the health of our community, by the plight of its weakest members.

Where we are happy to admire the wealthy because they are wealthy, or to hate them because they are wealthy: liberate us from self-righteousness, jealousy, smugness and bitterness, and help us to inhale grace, and to walk in your footsteps.

Where we mistake greatness for success, where we measure wealth by how much we have, rather than by how much we need, reveal to us the nature of true riches, of the wealth that catastrophe cannot threaten.

Where people feel and are made to feel worthless because they are not creditworthy – help us to embody a different vision of what it means to be human.

Fill us with your Spirit that we might live in accordance with the Spirit of Jubilee. That our vision of you would eclipse the false utopias we have learned to treasure. That our commitment to you might spring from every dimension of our being. To the glory of your name.

Professor Morna Hooker

Grace

27th Octber 2019

A month or so ago, I was invited to lunch at another College. The occasion was intended to be a 'thank-you' to those of us who had recently made donations to the College to establish bursaries. But, of course, there's no such thing as a free lunch! Less than a week later, I received the follow-up letter. Would I like to make another donation, in order to help establish a further bursary?

If the College's hospitality were to be regarded as some sort of quid pro quo, this would have been a very expensive lunch! But of course, it wasn't. It was just that, when we are given something, whether 'we' means individuals or institutions, we all feel under an obligation to do something in return – usually to give something back of similar value, but at the very least to say 'thank you'; or perhaps, as in this case, to offer some kind of token of gratitude. Next Sunday we shall be saying 'thank you' for and to this College's benefactors.

The giving and receiving of gifts is part of our culture, and there's a certain element of 'keeping up with the Jones' involved. When heads of state make official visits to this country, we are usually told who gave what to whom. What the Queen has done with all the useless, though probably valuable, gifts she has received over the years goodness knows; are they every used? I doubt it. What, after all, could she do with an elephant or a ritual dagger? They are simply tokens of a relationship between two states – and gifts are, indeed, a way of cementing and strengthening a relationship – or perhaps, if you give a totally inappropriate gift, of destroying it.

This giving-and-receiving-of-gifts is, of course, no modern development.

Gifts played an important part in the culture of the ancient world, and they were regularly exchanged. That word 'exchange' indicates that the underlying idea was that the gifts should be of approximately equal value. If they weren't, then the less generous party would have lost face. The underlying assumption is plain: my gift must match your gift, because if my gift to you is worth less than yours to me, then I shall be for ever indebted to you, and our relationship is not equal. It is embarrassing, to say the least, if I give my neighbours a calendar for Christmas, and they respond with a lavish hamper from Harrods.

But what sort of gift could you make, in the ancient world, to the gods? Since the gods were seen as the source of everything men and women possessed, there was no possibility whatever of 'keeping up' with them. In our Old Testament reading this evening (Deut. 6:10-12; 10:17-20) we heard a Jewish answer to this problem. We were reminded first of what God had given his people Israel. He had brought them out of slavery in Egypt and established them in a good land – the land of Israel – where they were enjoying food and freedom.

So what could they give God in return? They could of course offer sacrifices – but these would be mere tokens, since they believed that everything they had was given by God. As one Christian hymn-writer was to put it, centuries later: 'We give Thee but thine own, whate'er the gift may be'. How can one make reciprocal gifts to God? It is impossible.

There were, however, two positive things that the Israelites were able to do; firstly, they could show their loyalty to the God who had done so much for them by obeying his commands, so cementing the relationship between themselves and their God. Since he had done so much for them, they felt under an obligation to carry out his wishes. And secondly, they could share his gifts with others – that is, with foreigners living in their country. After all, when they had lived in Egypt they had been in the same situation themselves. If they wanted to show their gratitude to God, they must pass his gifts on. This is the logic behind the twin commands to love God and to love one's neighbour: they must show the same generosity to others as God had shown to them.

This reasoning is not a one-off event, for the same logic runs throughout the biblical texts. We had another example in the reading we heard just now from 2 Corinthians (8:1-9). Paul is trying to persuade his converts in Corinth to contribute to a collection he is making on behalf of poor Christians in Jerusalem. His arguments are an interesting model for anyone trying to raise money for a good cause. First, he reminds the Corinthians of the generosity with which other churches have contributed to this cause; they will surely not wish to be outdone by others in their giving. In other words, Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to 'keep up with the Jones' in their contributions to the collection.

And then he plays his trump card: 'You know the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ', he writes – know 'how, though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich'. He sees the incarnation as a deliberate self-emptying by Christ, who embraced the limitations and poverty of human existence in order that he might share his riches with humankind. The implication is clear. If he did that for them, what should they be doing for others?

To understand Paul's argument here, we need to know that he is playing on the meaning of the Greek word charis, which is often translated 'grace', but which also means 'generosity' or 'gift'. 'You know the grace – the generosity -– of our Lord Jesus Christ' he writes – in other words, you know what he has given you. He became poor – impoverished himself – in order that you might share his riches. You can't get more generous than that. Grace is at the heart of the Gospel, as we remember every time we say 'the Grace' together – the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit – fellowship, not just with God, but with one another. And that's a good summary of the Gospel. We experience God's love in the grace or generosity shown to us in the work of his Son, and we share that gift in our fellowship with others. Those who experience God's grace or generosity must in turn be generous. How could they not be?

So here is Paul using the fact that the reciprocity of gifts was so important in the ancient world to shame the Corinthians into contributing to the less well-off Christians in Jerusalem. You may perhaps think that he's using sleight of hand, since he's using a metaphorical understanding of the words 'riches' and 'poverty' to appeal for the alleviation of a very physical need. But we get the point. Since the Corinthians had been given so much by God, they were under an obligation to give something back – except, of course, that in this case, they were being asked to give something, not to God, but to other Christians.

But wait a minute. Doesn't Paul talk elsewhere about God's grace being free? Isn't that something that's implied in the very word 'grace', since the related Latin word, gratis, is used to mean something that's given to us for free? And when I consult my dictionary, I find it defining the word 'grace' as meaning 'the free and unmerited favour of God'. Isn't grace a sheer gift, without any strings attached to it? So why should I give anyone anything in return for God's grace?

Paul, I think, would have said that yes, what God has given us is a sheer gift in the sense that it was given without any prior requirements on our part, and that we cannot give back anything similar. But the very nature of the gift compels us to pass it on.

Some of you may have heard of the work of the charity 'Camfed'. The 'Cam' bit of the name doesn't refer in this case to the University of Cambridge, even though the organization is based in Cambridge, but to the Campaign for female education in Africa. Since it was founded, in 1993, the charity has supported one and a half million girls in secondary schools in various African countries. There is now a daughter organization, 'Cama', made up of the alumnae of the scheme.

I saw some of them on the News recently, dancing for Prince Harry on his African tour. They are women whose lives were transformed by what they were given, and who are now busy enabling, in their turn, many other girls to receive secondary education. Those who were given the riches of education through the gifts of others are now sharing those riches with the next generation.

And that was what Paul was getting at. How could the Corinthians respond adequately to the amazing grace of God? His answer was that they should make the message of the gospel the model for their own lives. As God had loved them, so they must love others. Because God had given to them, they must give to others. And that means that, unlike the gifts that are part of a reciprocal relationship between two parties, God's gift sets up a triangular relationship.

The gospel is not about an exclusive two-way relationship between an individual and God, but involves others. God cannot be repaid – but we can respond by showing similar grace to others. The true response to grace is to share God's generosity to us with others: to share the good news of the gospel, but also to share our wealth, our talents, our privileges, and to empathize with our neighbours' concerns and needs, helping them to the best of our ability. It's all summed up in the prayer we used earlier in this service: 'May our gratitude to you be manifest in our love for others'. That is the logic behind Divine economics.

Revd. Dr Simon Perry

Remembrance, The Healing of Legion

10th November 2019

Luke 8:26-39

This remembrance service, we reflect upon the cost of war upon those who have suffered its effects most keenly. From an economic perspective – these costs are rarely available for public scrutiny – especially on days like Remembrance Sunday. We don't want to hear about Iraqi soldiers, their legs blown of by anti-tank mines, crying for their mothers as they bleed to death in the sand. War correspondents report this as a frequent phenomenon – the counter narrative to the table-thumping myths that all too often support war. Such coverage is hardly likely to win ratings.

We were fed the myth, the press always force-feeds us in war time. We were kept from seeing. There has been no more candour in Iraq or Afghanistan than there was in Vietnam. But in the age of live satellite feeds the military has perfected the appearance of candour. The myth of war, after all, the myth of glory and honour, sells newspapers and boosts ratings – real war reporting does not. In war, the fake news has always been part of the problem. In war time, as senator Hiram Johnson observed in 1917 – truth is always the first casualty.

But maybe truth is always also the last casualty. When you look in particular, at the mental suffering of those war veterans who have been exposed to more horror than most can imagine. Mass culture has largely shut out those who speak the truth about the consequences of war. The manufactured illusion of heroes plays to a culture that celebrates the objectification of humans who are weaker than us. And since those who have escaped the clutches of war - often struggling to cope with trauma, guilt and shame - are reticent to resurrect in public the nightmare that will haunt them for the rest of their lives, their stories go untold.

It is highly like the story of the demon possessed man from our Gospel reading was one such story. The symptoms listed bear a striking resemblance to what is currently called post-traumatic stress – and the treatment given him, runs in striking correspondence to the those offered today to victims of combat trauma. This was confirmed to me both by clinical psychologists here at Cambridge, and army chaplains working at the military hospital in Lichfield – who kindly read through my work when I conducted some research on this bible passage a couple of years ago.

The language of the account is thoroughly militaristic! The name 'Legion' refers only to a military unit with an operational strength of 5-6000. The collective description for the swineherd was not usually used of pigs, but of bands of military recruits. Their charge into the lake is the word used for a battle charge. And the entire region happened to be occupied by the Tenth Legion, who bore on their standard, the head of a boar. This was a region brutalised time and again by the Romans in the first century - and victims of this kind of alien occupation often exhibit the behaviours described in this reading.

If Legion is indeed a personal embodiment of the military abuses inflicted upon a people, then we may assume he had suffered first-hand his own personal experience of Roman-related trauma. If cosmological demonic forces have imposed monstrous injustice, unspeakable trauma and inconsolable humiliation upon the populace, then those forces have surely come raging through the shattered psyche of this solitary human life.

The American Psychiatric association list four symptom groups – all of which are consistent with the suffering of Legion. This struck me as I once read accounts of victims of combat trauma from the Vietnam war – so I will quote some of those accounts which add flesh to the symptoms suffered by Legion.

Firstly, this man was not born demon possessed – but had only suffered this trauma for a defined period of time, and after his healing was free to return to his household. Something had happened to him. As one former soldier has declared: "Why I became like that? It was all evil. All evil. Where before, I wasn't. I look back, I look back today and I'm horrified at what I turned into. What I was. What I did. I just look at it like it was somebody else… It was somebody else. Somebody had control of me"

That the man lived among the tombs, may speak of survivor guilt felt by so many. Obsession with the dead can feel as though it makes former comrades present. As another Vietnam survivor said, 'I never expected to return home alive, and emotionally never have'.

The rage felt by Legion, was plain to see…Neither guards nor chains were sufficient to restrain the demonic power that surged through him, driving him away from human society and into the desert. Again, these three aspects of the man's behaviour are echoed frequently by today's victims of PTSD, as exemplified by the war veteran who often underwent (a) the un-metaphorical experience of being seized by a 'monster,' (b), with violent results and (c), consequent isolation: "Every three days I would totally explode, lose it for no reason at all. I'd be sitting there calm as could be, and this monster would come out of me with a fury most people didn't want to be around. So it wasn't just over there [in Vietnam]. I brought it back here with me."

The healing Jesus brought seemed dramatic and violent – an event of mass porcine suicide. Although if this event happens where the reading claims – it was 30 miles from the Galilean coast, making these the most athletic pigs in history. But there are various alternative readings, and various possible locations in territory that was a inhabited by Jewish and pagan folk alike.

In any case, the fall-out from this incident could not have been instantaneous. The herdsmen had to flee, spread word in the city and in the surrounding country – actions that would at least take several hours. Presumably, the healer spent some of those hours establishing what one therapist describes the first of three stages of recovery from trauma: an environment of safety, sober-mindedness and self-care. By the time the crowds arrived on the scene, that first stage appeared to be well underway, since they witnessed for themselves the man from whom the demons had gone no longer prostrate but sitting at the feet of Jesus, no longer naked but clothed, no longer tormented but sober-minded.

The second instruction from Jesus is to tell the story of what God has done for him. Not to preach, not to report the incident which was already widely known. But to tell the story. This is the second stage of trauma recovery. Since such trauma victims usually have a dislocated sense of time – with a debilitating sense of past, a total lack of future, and an inability to escape the present – the discipline of telling the true story of who he was would be a profoundly difficult challenge for this man. The injunction to 'tell the story' may thus be understood as one of ongoing therapy, because the story of this man's life becomes no longer a fragmented tale of tragedy and trauma, but the story of how much God had done for him.

The third instruction from Jesus is to send him home. The man begged to go with Jesus, but Jesus instructed him to return to his household. This instruction prefigures the third element of recovery noted by Herman, namely 'reconnection', i.e., being reintegrated as part of his community, an environment in which the man is supported, heard, affirmed and above all, known. Such an environment would be a necessary part of the story of his healing: 'the poorly understood "spontaneous", or "natural," processes of recovery that happen in the native soil of a veteran's own community.' The real healing of this man was not simply the dramatic moment of exorcism – but the process Jesus set up, thoroughly in accordance with modern therapeutic models.

Part of what Remembrance day remembers – is the cost of war. Not only the cost upon those who have been killed, and bereaved, and displaced. But the cost upon even those who have survived, and returned home. The symptoms today are called PTSD but this is a diagnosis so ill defined it is unlikely to stand the test of time, any more than referring to it as shell-shock, or war-weariness, or demon-possession have stood the test of time. But all these inadequate labels highlight a cost of war that is often hidden from the accounts.

A Soldier's Prayer

We remember those we have sent to fight our wars,

We think of those who have not returned,

And we pray for those who have.

For those who suffer the aftermath of war:

For those who have died in Road Traffic Accidents, because they had learned they were invulnerable.

For those who have taken their own lives, because they had learned they were not.

For those who fear the rage than can overtake them at any moment, and who long for the peace that never can.

For those alienated from others, because they are alienated from themselves.

For those haunted by wounded memories that echo through long years,

And tormented by vivid images of ancient trauma.

May we help them to conquer their past, to remain present with them when inconsolable, to offer hope for a future that is not a fantasy.

May we become part of the narrative in which God-given time is restored to them.

Tiara Ataii

Economics and the Refugee Crisis

17th November 2019

A cost-benefit analysis; that's often the paradigm we use to talk about the refugee crisis.

Let's look at the way that people who are anti-refugee talk about the crisis. There are 'waves of migration' towards Europe and the Western world, sometimes reformulated as 'swarms' or 'streams'. This mass of people who are arriving upon our soil are coming in inconceivable numbers, such that they threaten to replace the indigenous population, wreck the healthcare system and the economy, and overhaul all cultural and religious norms.

The emotive nature of this discourse is so powerful that it's often difficult to see the wood from the trees. A 2016 survey of 40 Western countries found that respondents consistently overestimated the number of Muslim immigrants – typically the demographic associated with refugees coming to Europe. British respondents on average placed the current Muslim population at 15%, three times the real figure, whilst they overestimated the projected 2020 population by an even greater margin, placing it at 22% versus an actual projection of 6%.

This tendency to quantify is also seen in the discourse of those who are pro-refugee. Except that, for us, we speak about 'contributions to society'. Everyone has a famous list of refugees which they can reel off – ranging from Einstein to Mo Salah, Rita Ora to Lord Alf Dubs. The implication is that we should welcome refugees with open arms because they are not a burden – rather, they are 'value added'.

This presents us with a binary image of refugees based on give-and-take. On the one hand, you have your benefits scrounger who is getting the free ride into Europe, and on the other you have your luminary scientist who realises the immigrant dream to the extent that they become a cornerstone of that country's scientific legacy. The refugee is either coming in to give or take, to boom or bust economically-speaking, and nothing in between.

This is of course wildly unrealistic. It's a cliché but refugees are just like us. We tend to talk about refugees as if they're a homogenous group, but refugees are simply people who have been displaced, who have been forced to flee. So why is it that the luxury of being a normal person – someone who is neither a prodigious con artist coming to single-handedly wreck the host country, nor someone who wins the Nobel prize – is not reserved for refugees?

At the end of the day, refugees are simply people who have, or deserve, a particular status. Let's go back to Geneva, 1951. Europe, reeling from the effects of World War II comes up with a definition for refugees – they are people who have a 'well-founded fear of persecution'. With this definition comes the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees which is founded initially as a temporary agency to deal with hundreds of thousands European refugees after World War II. This temporary agency has now become one of the largest and most significant UN agencies, and the Geneva convention's description of the 'well-founded fear of persecution' has become the burden of proof that each refugee faces when presenting themselves to either UNHCR or a host country's government.

In other words, it's a moot point whether an asylum seeker is a remarkable person or not. A refugee is simply someone who can fit this criteria. In fact, it's indicative of the extent to which refugees have been dehumanised in the media that we feel that we need to 'rehumanise' them through their exceptional stories.

My own experience has born this out. Two years ago, I was volunteering in Chios, an island on the Aegean and a short boat ride away from Turkey, so most asylum seekers' first landing point in Europe. I was working as a Farsi interpreter for primarily Afghan refugees in a legal aid NGO. We'd spend most of our days going to Vial, a notorious camp a half an hour drive up the top of a hill. Ironically, the camp was attached to a functional rubbish processing plant. The stench was unbelievable. It was minus two degrees at the time, and being at the top of a hill, the winds were the sort that cut into your bones. If you were lucky you got a container, if you weren't, you got a tent.

We would go to Vial almost every day to meet with our clients and I would be passed around from lawyer to lawyer based on who needed assistance. One day, we found ourselves with a strange request. A 21-year-old Afghan man called Jawad presented himself to us with his interview transcript. The lawyer began to ask him what he'd like help with, and Jawad kept insisting that we read his interview transcript. 'Is it good? Is it enough?' he kept asking. The lawyer explained patiently that it wasn't his place to speculate whether Jawad would receive asylum or not, and that if he was rejected there was the possibility for him to appeal, and that he should make sure that he collects any more evidence to support his claim. Jawad was not appeased. He continued to ask: 'Is it enough?'. I briefly glanced at the transcript. It seemed that his entire family had been killed in an air strike.

I could see why Jawad was concerned. There had recently been rumours circulating in the camp that Europe was now only accepting Syrians as a matter of policy, with the only exception being minors. It wasn't true, but the rumour had already spread far enough to create a state of panic.

An hour later, we got ready to go and started walking past the front of the camp. Being a rubbish processing plant there wasn't much room for greenery, with the exception of one large tree whose branches streamed over the entrance. I waved to Jawad as I saw him at the top of the tree in what seemed like a childlike pose, hanging belly up from one of the larger branches. I was happy that he seemed to had found some respite in mucking about, with his friends watching him from below.

It was then that I realised that he had a noose in his hands and he was tying it around his neck.

I still don't quite remember what happened next but I remember that half of the camp gathered around very quickly. I then remember the Greek police and army pointing their guns at the tree and I remember telling them to give me 5 minutes to see what I could do. And then I remember being pushed to the front of the crowd and being asked to mediate. And I suddenly realised that this would be someone's life in my hands.

I tried initially a few different comments – one being that he should never give up hope, one being that one day he'd look back on this as a dark phase in his life. This all fell flat. He refused to answer and kept shifting his eyes between the noose and the ground. I only got an answer out of him when I told him that if he came down, I would do everything in my power to make sure he found safety. He asked: 'do you promise?', and then eventually climbed down from the tree.

Looking back on this – I think what pushed Jawad over the edge was not the poor conditions. It wasn't sleeping in a tent in the snow. Neither was it the rotten food or the lack of running water. It was the sense that his history 'wasn't enough'. That in order to find safety he would have to be something he was not. He would have to be the child on

the UNICEF advert, the man who scales the Parisian building to save a dangling child, the luminary scientist, all in one.

Perhaps he had come to Europe hoping that the persecution he had suffered would be enough to guarantee him finding safety. He probably realised fairly quickly that it wouldn't be enough for him to find immediate aid such as accommodation or food, but maybe he had held onto hope that it would be enough for him to find some sort of resolution. What ultimately drove him up that tree was, I reckon, feeling that nothing would ever be enough. That his safety depended upon his past suffering, and despite everything he had gone through, the bar for that would remain simply far too high.

So – given that I've spent a few minutes criticising how we talk about the refugee crisis, how should we talk about it? For one, it's worth pointing out that we are now treating the refugee crisis as if it's unprecedented. It's not uncommon to see in newspapers that 2015 was the 'beginning' or 'outburst' of the refugee crisis. In fact, we are no strangers to mass displacement in the modern era. To a large extent, human history is the history of displacement. Before the nation state and before the drawing up of borders, however, it was much harder to distinguish between the citizen, and the citizen's flip-side, the 'refugee' – or in other words, between those who have a state, and between those who don't. As Aleinikoff has said, the modem world operates under the motto of a state for everyone and everyone in a state.' Therefore, 'refugees represent a failure of the state system, a "problem to be solved"'. We've now even redefined what the refugee crisis means. It used to be a crisis for those who were forcibly displaced. Now we read it as a crisis for the host state.

To go back to our cost-benefit analysis, I suggest that we go back to basics. The law tells us what a refugee is. And, as much as we like to think that we do, we don't live in exceptional times. Migration, be it forced or voluntary, has always been the rule and not the exception. And as pertains changing public opinion on refugees, perhaps we could be a little more adamant, that, in the same way that you don't need to be the next Einstein to be a refugee, you also don't need to be someone special to be made a refugee. It could easily have been any one of us.

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Economics: The next right thing (Conclusion to the Series)

24th November, 2019

It is, perhaps, fortuitous that as Michalmas Term draws to an end, and our sermon series on economics reaches its conclusion, we stand on the brink of one of the great moral abominations of our age: the cinema release of Frozen II. Yes, not just one vomit-inducing Disney animated fantasy fairy tale, but two. Another trendy movie in which you are exhorted to overcome unfair obstacles and insurmountable odds by means of PC isolationism.

Now, sure, the violins may inspire you to scoop your own ears out with knitting needle, and the artificial emotions of the voices may magically summon up the contents of your last meal, but the greatest crime of all is Hollywood's latest moral message. In one of the key tracks from the movie, the audience is exhorted to 'Do the next right thing'. Critics are heralding this as the great moral message of our times: the world is in chaos, the future is bleak, you don't know what's coming, so just do the next right thing.

What has this got to do with economics? In one way or another, different talks this term have highlighted how economics reaches into the root of our being.

We began by looking at our modern default morality is rooted in an entire history of debt, the sanctification of debt. That debt fundamentally determines our moral outlook.

Johan Larsson cited Adam Smith to offer an alternative pattern of morality: that real morality arises out of our fundamental sympathy with others, to the point where their joy and successes become ours.

Professor Hooker spoke about how Grace contravenes the prevailing climate of economic reciprocity. If God gives freely to us, we give freely to others. If grace lies at the heart of our humanity, it defines us more fundamentally than debt.

Professor McFarland reminded us how silver and gold belong to the Lord of hosts – the ultimate keeper of the coin, and as such a relationship that eclipses the creditor-debtor relationship.

Tiara Ataii last week spoke about how we measure refugees through the lens of a cost-benefit analysis, regarding them as swarms or streams – playing right into the hands of demonising those likely to become indebted to us.

When we looked at remembrance, we saw how one of the major symptoms of combat trauma was the loss of personal narrative – and when Jesus healed Legion, the restoration of narrative displaced the alienation that defined him. Legion became the narrative of how much God had done for him – a narrative that displaces debt as the principle definition of our humanity.

In 1887, Friedriche Nietzsche argued creditor-debtor relationships lie at the heart of our moral self-understanding. To be in a state of debt, is to be in a state of guilt. In fact, the English word, Should, shares this same root as the

German word for debt and guilt. You are in a state of debt, there is something you are compelled to do – something you Should do, because of your guilt. And that is obviously, to pay the debt.

Others have pointed out that something as basic as minding your p's and q's reinforces debt as the defining characteristic of modern humanity. It is rooted in Feudal relationships with your Feudal Lord, and transformed into everyday debtor-creditor relationships with other people. In most European languages, to say 'please' is to ask someone to grant you credit, to submit a plea. It is short for 'if you please', which of course, you would still say in French. The response, having been granted your request, is to say what? Thank you – which simply means, you will think on it, you will remember your debt until it is paid off. You will keep it in mind. The phrase 'much obliged' is even clearer. Or in French – merci. Since being in debt makes you a moral criminal until it is paid off, you are at the mercy of whoever is your creditor. That all sounds horrible, so thankfully – the final response it that exchange is what, in French? De rien – it is nothing. There is no debt. Or in English 'it's my pleasure' – it pleases me to do this so there is no accumulated debt.

Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of the history of debt, and the way it reaches into the human psyche, is highlighted by an Italian Philosopher, who argued that homo sapiens devolved into homo economicus, who has now devolved into homo debitor. That our self-understanding is radically identified by the debts we carry.

The tragic story of a friend of mine, illustrates the point. Suffering a rare disease that every few months requires medication that costs around £1500, and when the situation is desperate the NHS foot the bill. However, his friends in the US, where the power of big pharma means that the same medication costs £25000, are left in a state of profound debt. And they have come to understand themselves not principally as sick, but as indebted. It is clearly not the case that one friend is good because he lives in the UK but bad if he lives in the US. This is not to say that the American is powerless, or does not receive sympathy, or help. But fundamentally, the perception of others regardless of how well intentioned, is one of an indebted person. That is how he feels and is made to feel. But it is only the wider context that defines him as a debtor, and my friend in the UK as creditworthy.

When Jesus forgave the paralysed man, he was not simply wiping clean his economic debt: he was wiping clean his moral state – the guilt, the shame, the indebtedness to society, the oppressive worthlessness someone in his state was made to feel. By forgiving him, Jesus reached into the core of his being, displacing debt with forgiveness. Unburdening him. Freeing him to stand up and walk out. By the moral framework of the day, Jesus had not done the next right thing!

So, back to the question of what it means to do the next right thing? It is to focus on the next moral decision under your nose without looking at the ethical context that defines you. Preoccupation with the next right thing, blinkers us from asking how we determine what the right thing is. Might it be to challenge to wider context in which life-saving drugs are inflated in price? Might it be to lift our eyes from immediate – and take our bearings? As the psalmist says, to lift up our eyes to the hills to see where our help comes from? Doing the next right thing is not necessarily right.

As Slavoj Zizek famously says, 'Don't act, Just think!' Or as Clint Eastwood used to say, 'Don't just do something: stand there!'

The moral message of Frozen II might not be particularly moral: last night, when the film was showed in Birmingham the result was a mass machete attack with teenagers pitched against the police. The real question, of course, with economics is whether we can lift our eyes from the immediate, from the next right thing, and reflect seriously upon the extent to which economics determines who we are at the core of our being.

Revd. Dr Simon Perry

Christmas Reflection

1st December 2019

Benefits Street is a channel 4 documentary, widely criticized as the thinly-veiled public-shaming of Britain's poorest and most vulnerable people. It's a TV series designed to leave us looking down on people, judging them as feckless, undeserving and passive. It's how many people imagine God viewing humanity.

As a Chaplain, I sometimes wonder how, if there is a place called heaven, its inhabitants must view life on earth:

It's easy to imagine the TV lounges of heaven packed with angels glued to gigantic Flat Screen TVs that narrate events on earth today in the same way. With detached superiority, shaking their immortal heads as they peer down upon the lives of terminally pathetic mortals: pathetic morals merrily grumbling their way through a series of avoidable crises, as their quest for a happy life slowly turns the world into a cosmic ash tray. And what happens when God barges into the TV Lounge? My sense is that the God of Scripture is not interested in watching TV because he would rather appear on it.

But... this is not the God who appears as a contestant on Love Island, off to swan around on planet earth, get noticed and achieve some kind of cheap fame that might last a millennium or two.

This is not the God who appears on I'm a celebrity: in a desperate bid to revive his waning popularity and win public acclaim by enduring some fake and trivial hardship.

This is not even the God who commits Poverty Tourism in a charity fact-finding documentary, visiting the most God-forsaken parts of earth, be they Nazareth, Bethlehem, or Stoke on Trent.

The reading from John's Gospel speaks of a God who takes up residence on Benefits Street. The God who becomes mortal, a vulnerable, impoverished, fragile, pathetic mortal. Not simply visiting Benefit Street for the experience, but subjecting himself fully to the terrible conditions in which so many people struggle.

In front of the entire cosmos, the human Jesus is God incarnate – not as an attention-seeking celebrity, or a fame-hungry narcissist, not as a champagne socialist, or a boutique activist. The God of heaven becomes powerless. A fragile baby in all the finery and luxury of an animal feeding trough.

If there is a place called heaven, and if it ever touches the earth – it allies itself with the baby in the feeding trough: Its love radiates from those who have relinquished the quest for popularity; its power electrifies those who embrace powerlessness, its hope animates those who have abandoned every false utopia. Heaven on earth begins in the feeding trough, in the food bank, in Benefits Street.

That is the message of Christmas: God-with-us.