Economics and Faith - LENT 2012 Sermons

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Water Into Wine

Economics and Faith Sermon One

Simon Perry

Throughout this new term, we will be exploring different dimensions of Economics in the light of what Scripture has to say about it – and calling upon the insights of various members of the college over the next few weeks.

Economics is a word with Greek roots – very similar roots to the word for Ecology. Both refer to the word for 'house' or 'household'. One refers to the logic of the Household, the other to the laws that govern a household. So it seems to me, that Economics – arises naturally from Ecology.

Ecology refers to the resources available to a household, and economics refers to how those resources are governed. So, strictly speaking, economists are eco-lawyers – ensuring that the resources at our disposal are governed well.

Six huge vats of water, used for ritual hand-washing, are the resources available at one household where a wedding is taking place. Jesus, it seems, manages those resources by presenting them to the guests as eight hundred bottles of Chateau Lafite. What is going on there?

It's one of those miracles I've always wished was never in the gospels. What is the point? All we can see is the hosts getting nervous because Jesus, his mother, and the other guests have necked almost all the wine. You can picture Mary's mischievous face: "Jesus – erm, all the wine has gone – so, er, hintety hintety."

Jesus rolls his eyes – "Oh Mom! What's it got to do with me, I haven't started work yet!"

Mary just whispers to the servants, "Do everything he say… he's got superpowers, you know."

And, of course, we know the rest of the story. Up until this point, everyone's been drinking Lambrusco from Morrisons, and now – the host wheels out approximately eight hundred thousand pounds-worth of fine wine. There it is – the economics of Jesus.

What happened there, who knows. If John's report reflects events faithfully, then either water turned into wine, or there was a mass hallucination of the palate.

The natural reaction to such a story, is simply to say – well, there are laws of nature, and Jesus is not following them. Well, we say with moral superiority, in this community we obey the laws of chemical fusion. Here in the twentieth century, where the crudest forms of Enlightenment reasoning still govern the mind-set of so many, we draw the conclusion that so-called miracles like this one – simply cannot happen, because we do not believe in miracles…

Or do we? And it's worth remembering here, the real basis of the word for belief. I believe it's an Old English phrase – by life. Believing, is not the capacity to perform the mental gymnastics necessary to convince yourself of stuff you know isn't really true. To believe in something, is to live as though it were true. Whatever it is your lifestyle is based upon, consciously or otherwise – that is what you believe.

So – in that light – it is worth asking again whether we believe in miracles. Whether the economic systems upon which we rely, arise naturally from ecological realities. Whether the planet can sustain the resources we enjoy, we aspire to, and work to achieve.

It srikes me as inconsistent, on the one hand to live as though we can draw limitless growth from the limited resources of the planet – and then, on the other – to scoff at reports that Jesus turns water into wine. It strikes me as inconsistent to ridicule the Genesis accounts of creation – in which God creates a world out of nothing – whilst believing in an economic system which conjures up something out of nothing.

Some of the core foundations of the economics that dominate our day, have their basis in crude, fairy-tale miracles.

For instance, several Guardian articles this year have argued that the more Libertarian one's approach to land ownership, tax and government regulation – the more you are forced to deny ecological realities – realities which show how the actions you take with your property, can have a real and measurable effect on other people's property – even if the only property those other people possess is their own body. If I benefit economically from a coal-burning power station, I don't want the inconvenience of believing that what I do with my land can affect the property of other people. Because their property rights then impinge upon my right to do whatever I like with my land. It's a crude example, but the economics in which we believe, will often lead us to believe in ecological fairy-tales where our actions don't have consequences.

So – back to this miracle in the bible. In fact, there are no miracles in the Bible – because miracle is a Latin word and the Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek. Here in John's gospel, this event is described as a 'sign'. But what does it point to? The fact that Jesus can do miracles? If we read this story as an economic statement – are we forced to conclude that, if God so wishes, he can suspend the laws of nature, wave a magic wand and make everything alright? Okay, you've run out of wine. Okay, you've used up all the planet's resources. Never mind – God is here. Everything will be okay…

There is another way of reading this story: through the lens of a miracle well attested in the early church. When they celebrated Eucharist, their practice was a little different from ours. The offertory, for instance, was not the point of the service where you toss coins into a collection pot. In the offertory, the congregation brought their offering for communal celebration. So, for instance, orphans would bring water to pour into the common cup. Those with a little more income might bring a bottle of Jacob's Creek and pour that into the common cup. And the aristocracy would bring their Chateau Lafite. All of it, poured into one huge vat – offered up to God – and then distributed among the congregation.

That way, when they said, "though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one cup," it carried serious weight. And for poorest members of that congregation – they brought water and tasted wine. For a faith that transcended the social barriers and classes of the day, that was nothing short of a miracle. And if Jesus was pointing towards anything, I suspect it was that.

The sign he performed here at Cana, in Galilee, on the brink of his ministry – is the promise of a new age, a new order. A new way of being together – and as such a new politics – one that would bring with it, a new economics. In coming weeks, we'll explore further how this new economics brought down the wrath of the Roman empire upon those early Christian communities – resulting in the widespread persecution of Christians.

But what we see here, with Jesus, is not simply a conjuring trick to save his friends from social embarrassment. For those Jewish people who knew their Scriptures, time after time after time – God's promise of a new era of comfort for the people, freedom from oppression and a new era of economic prosperity, is expressed through the abundant provision of new wine. In fact, it is harder to find Prophets who do not speak in this way, than it is to find those who do. Joel and Amos and Hosea and Malachi, Haggai and Zephania and Micah, and Isaiah and Jeremiah. Time and time again – the state of Israel's economy is expressed according to the availability of wine.

At the dawn of his ministry – this acted parable, this abundant overflow of wine, is simply to draw attention to the new age that dawns with the presence of this Jesus. That economic implications of this – will be the subject of this term's Sunday evenings. At this stage, with this sign at Cana in Galilee, Jesus has simply made a promise.

If ecology is about the resources at our disposal, and economy is about how we manage those resources – then Jesus is an economist, and one whose economy breaks the rules. Nobody expects water to turn into wine. Nobody expected that kind of economic move. Now, at the risk of treading on thin ice, and present company excepted – it is not often that you meet an economist who, when faced with an alternative economic system – will not say, "Oh, that would never work." I suppose there was a heavy-weight economist here in Cambridge in the 20th Century – who did propose a new, alternative economics: but what was the world's response to Keynes? "It would never work." So we venerate him, but don't follow him.

Jesus didn't just outline an alternative economic system: he embodied it, and according to John's Gospel, it worked. The sign recounted by John, is an instance of micro-economics at work. As the gospels unfold, we will see more clearly how it works its way out in his life and ministry.

Bias to the Poor

Economics and Faith Part Two

Simon Perry

This evening, we cover the second in our series on the subject of God and Economics, looking this week at whether God is biased towards the poor. This certainly seems to be the case in Scripture, and in particular, throughout the Gospel of Luke.

In Luke, we read that Jesus came to preach good news to the poor. Luke's Jesus blesses the poor and curses the wealthy. And in particular, we have the Magnificat, one of the most popular songs of the New Testament – crying out for justice for the poor. Of course we sing the Magnificat every week during term time – so it's a very familiar text to many of us. And it takes me back to my time in the military:

One of my first security roles in the military, was that of 'car door opener' – which is more complicated than it sounds. A member of the royal family came to inspect our base, located somewhere in east Anglia – and I was the car – door – opener.' I was confident, of course, because I had been carefully trained and had become technically proficient in the art of car-door-opening. As such, I was wearing my 'number one' uniform, the immaculate, highly pressed and excessively polished ceremonial dress required when protecting VIPs on a military base. Having spent hours preparing my number one uniform, I was now ready for the task of 'car door opener.'

But as the Bentley carrying the queen's cousin came into view, on the eastern horizon there appeared the silhouette of a pigeon. But this was no ordinary pigeon. This was a pigeon with bowel problems. With such severe bowel problems, I'm surprised it managed to part company with the ground. But having hoisted itself into the sky, the afflicted pigeon zeroed his target, and began his bombing run. As the black Bentley pulled up, the moment that must have brought immense relief to the afflicted pigeon, had the exact opposite effect upon me – as he downloaded the contents of his bowels – like a tin of grey paint, splattering itself across my number one uniform, in an incident technically known as a bird-strike as I opened the car door. The queen's cousin began to laugh, and I didn't have the impression he was laughing with me.

The incident ended with my Sargeant asking why these things always happened to me, producing a pair of nail clippers, and telling me the airfield needed mowing. And so ended my first encounter with royalty.

Israel's anointed King is coming. These early chapters of Luke seem to show how, even the best and brightest folk did not know how to react when Israel's Messiah arrived – in fact, when he did show up, even those the Bible itself described as blameless – completely fluffed it when the Messiah's imminent arrival was proclaimed. Elizabeth and Zechariah, John the Baptist himself, and even Mary – just didn't get it. The record of Mary's reaction, comes in the form of this song, which – throughout history has echoed through beautiful settings from the lips of countless choirs in churches and cathedrals around the world.

But, unlike Sunday Bloody Sunday, Mary's song was a rebel song. A subversive anthem, crying out for justice. To those in the corridors of Rome and the palaces of Jerusalem, the Magnificat was trouble-making rap music penned by a teenage mum from a council estate in Bradford.

Mary's song – the Magnificat – speaks of a Messiah who will be politically active, who will establish justice, who will instigate regime change to bring down oppressors. It's exciting, and rebellious and subversive. The only slight problem with the Magnificat, is that it is completely and utterly wrong. None of its promises were fulfilled, either in Luke's Gospel, or in Mary's life time, or in human history. Throughout her life and throughout history, unjust leaders remained at their thrones – oppressive regimes continued unhindered – and if this is what Jesus came to do, he failed.

Of course, by saying this, I am not questioning the word of God. Luke has told us that he has written a historically ordered account, and the more familiar you become with Luke's Gospel, the more you appreciate his economy of language, his careful word craft, he says nothing by accident, and relates every passage of this gospel to every other. So why has he put in this place, at the very heart of the Gospel, an inspired, prophetic hymn about a future that does not come true?

Is it heretical to suggest that perhaps Mary got it wrong? Mary is not presented as infallible by any Gospel, and in fact, Jesus corrects his mother on more than one occasion. But if Mary gets it wrong with this hymn, what did she get wrong? That God cares about the hungry and the poor and the oppressed?

The first part of the hymn is straightforward, as Mary marvels that she could have such a central role in God's plan to honour his covenant with Abraham. When she says that, from now on, all generations will call me blessed – she is talking about the descendents of Abraham – and knows that she is a key figure in God's promise to make Israel a powerful and righteous nation. In fact, generations and generations appears three times in this short hymn.

And when first century Jews read and write of generations, the primary thought is the Abrahamic gene – the descendents of Abraham. It is the fulfilment of God's purposes through these people – so if these people are oppressed, and God is promising to bring them liberation, then surely – the consequence is inevitably to do away with the oppressors, with those who are mistreating and marginalising the children of Abraham. So, surely, if God is acting today – that means bringing down rulers, lifting up nobodies, satisfying hunger and sending away the rich.

Mary's spontaneous hymn of prayer expresses the true hope of Israel – but also outlines how God is going to achieve them. Surely, if God is going to honour his promises, then he MUST act in this way. There is no other conceivable way for God to act, but decisive – political rebellion. The Marxist readings of this hymn rightly present it as a hymn of subversion, but the problem is borne out by the rest of Luke's Gospel.

In the end Jesus was crucified because he did not bring down the mighty from their thrones, he was not the great political revolutionary – which is why Barabas was released in his place. This is why even the baby who leaps in his mother's womb when he hears this hymn – John the Baptist himself – even John the Baptist looks at what Jesus is doing, shakes his head, and has to ask why Jesus is not doing the things that a Messiah really ought to be doing!

God makes a promise to bring justice, Jesus makes a promise of good news to the poor – to bring justice for the whole earth. To do away with violent oppressors and bring regime change. So when God declares that this is about to happen, it is only natural that everyone thinks they know exactly how God is going to achieve this: Zechariah the righteous priest, Mary the faithful teenager, John the prophetic Baptist - each one a good and faithful representative of righteous Israel – each of them living in expectation of the liberation of Israel, each of them, completely wrong.

Of course, that begs the question of what Jesus really was up to. Why all this business about good news to the poor? Why all this talk about blessed are the poor? Why these promises about filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty? What do we do with these kinds of promises in the Gospels, these kinds of statements, when – the fact is – in our world today - every year – 15 million children die of malnutrition.

Where is the God who favours the poor? Where are the just governments promised in this song? And inevitably – we end up back at a recurring dilemma: how can we have an all powerful-God who is also all-loving? What kind of God parks himself on the clouds doing nothing about this? Is this the kind of God who does not keep the promises we read about in Scripture?

Well, we can spiritualise Jesus' teaching on poverty – talk about spiritual poverty – and talk about spiritual regime change. But really, once you've given your brain a chance, you have to think again.

Of course, we can play the – oh, when the poor die, they go to a better place game. We can say – well, life is short, but eternity is where you rest at peace forever, and everything is alright? But then – if eternity with God, bears no relation to life as we know it – what is the point of life as we know it?

What legacy have the gospels left us, that can be deemed 'good news to the poor'? In what sense are the poor, blessed? In what way has Jesus 'filled the hungry with good things'? On the one hand – it is clear that Jesus never intended to end poverty. "The poor you will always have with you," he once snapped.

I think, we find the seeds of an answer in presence of Christ. If this Jesus is the Christ whose presence we celebrate in worship – if this Jesus is, after all, Israel's Messiah, God's anointed liberator – then how do we recognise him? He doesn't pitch up in a black Bentley expecting a car-door opener.

This is not the Marxist God who opens the doors of heaven to the poor, and shuts out the rich… otherwise Abraham, the patriarchal millionaire, would not be waiting in paradise to welcome Lazarus into his post-mortem abode.

The radical edge of Jesus' being and teaching and action, is to be found with the fact that – he was not simply a king sitting on a distant throne, easing third world debt and capping executive pay. This is a Jesus who doesn't get anywhere near a throne. Whatever you did for the least of these, says Jesus, you did for me. This is a Jesus who identifies himself not with the elite classes with their hillside mansions in South Jerusalem. This is a Jesus, who doesn't simply listen to the lowest status folk in Israel. This is a Jesus who locates his own well-being amongst theirs – whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me.

And when Jesus says this, he is addressing peasants – the moment you have an ounce of economic power, you have the power to touch the face of God. To touch the face of God as it is seen amongst those most in need.

This is the radical edge of Jesus' teaching – not that God favours the poor. But that, your economic status has no bearing on your status as a human being in the eyes of God. Being wealthy is not necessarily a sign that God has

blessed you. Being poor is not necessarily a sign that God has cursed you. Jesus draws attention to a power beyond the economic power

Not with a fix-it mentality – because economic injustice has never been fixed. But the call is rather – for those who claim to be followers of this Jesus, to see his face in one another. For those who worship this Jesus, to put it into action by treating those most in need as though they were God himself. Not to rely upon a divine economic power to come along and put everything right – but to live and act and relate, as though there is a greater power beyond the current economic regime.

For those in a position of wealth – to treat their neighbour with the respect and care they would show God himself. For those struggling with poverty – to do exactly the same with what little they have – to treat their neighbour with the respect and care they would show to God himself. To live as though there was a power greater than the economic power of the day – and by living as though it were true, making it true.

Pay Ceasar what is due to Caesar; pay God what is due to God.

On Giving: Why Give? To Whom? How Much?

Economics and Faith - Talk Three

Ross Reason, Bursar, Robinson College

Should we give to charity? If so, how much, and to whom? Today's New Testament reading offers answers to the last two of these three questions but is a little hazy on the first: Zacchaeus gave 50% of his wealth to the poor. But why did he do it? Was it out of a sense of guilt? After all, 2000 years ago, tax collectors were thought of much the same way as bankers and hedge fund managers are today: or maybe it was in the hope of reward – the prospect of eternal salvation is a pretty motivating factor! And why 50%? Is that the hurdle rate for salvation or only for a rich man?

Ethical thinking offers two main approaches to the why – rule based reasoning and goal based reasoning. St Thomas Aquinas developed the rule based argument: for him whatever we have in "superabundance", that is whatever is above and beyond what we need to satisfy the reasonable needs of ourselves and our dependants is owed of natural right to the poor. For a rich man, this is a far higher standard than Zacchaeus lived up to. Subsequent thinkers in this deontological tradition were not content to take their rule from scripture and advanced arguments from first principles. Kant proposed an ethical system based on what he called the categorical imperative: an action is right if the principle on which it is based should be a universal law. The Oxford moral philosopher Richard Hare built on this: if our actions are to be moral they must be "universalizable" – we must be prepared to prescribe them independently of the role that we occupy. I must consider strangers and enemies as well as friends. So, when I ask, should I give to, say, help someone who is starving, I should imagine that I don't know whether I am the one who might be starving or not and ask myself what would I want to happen in this situation? Clearly one would give.

For a consequentialist the right approach when asking why give is not ex-ante moralising but ex-post results. If you define happiness as the ultimate "good", the maximisation of which is your goal, then give because it increases happiness, or in a Buddhist-equivalence, reduces suffering. But what weight to give various people's suffering? If you accept the premise that moral principles should be universalizable then the only answer is an equal weight. We should give an equal consideration to everyone's interests. This is a minimal principle of equality: it does not dictate equal treatment. Imagine that you come across 2 victims of a disaster, one with a crushed leg and one with a small gash. You only have 2 shots of morphine. An equal consideration of interests means that you give both to the person with the crushed leg: he will still be suffering far more after he has received the first shot of morphine than the person with the gash.

Now it gets uncomfortable. Last year 18 million people died from poverty-related diseases. 9 million of them were children. 1.4 billion people live on less than 80p a day. And that is not what they can buy in their countries with 80p, but what they could buy in ours.

But that's distressing so here's another story: imagine you are on your way to an important meeting – it might be a job interview. You are dressed in your best clothes and are in a bit of a hurry. You notice a 3 year old drowning in a shallow ornamental pool. You are the only adult around who can save her, but, not wanting to be late, and not wanting to ruin your expensive clothes, you rush on by and the child dies. Most people would say that your action was morally repugnant. On the other hand most of us can save thousands of lives with very little sacrifice yet choose not to: no one thinks it is morally repugnant not to donate money to Unicef when that appeal envelope lands on your mat yet it is exactly the moral equivalent of letting the child in the pond die as soon as one accepts the principle of equal consideration of interests. The strength of a moral imperative does not diminish with distance.

Fleshing out this principle allows one to answer the second question of how much to give: an equal consideration of interests leads to the following premise: we ought to prevent what is bad when we can do so without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance. This innocuous sounding principle is remarkably stringent. It means that we cannot go on living our comfortable, luxurious lives, for to do so it is necessary to allow some to die whom we might have saved. Saving every life we could would mean cutting our standard of living to the bare essentials to keep us alive and in employment and also would mean taking the most highly paid job we could, even if that job was loathsome to us. Whilst this would be morally heroic most of us are not saints so perhaps, in the hope that it might motivate more people to give a higher proportion of their wealth and income, it is better to say we should give everything above what we need to lead a life that is consistent with maintaining our motivation to give. For most of us in the developed world that is far above the traditional 10% tithe and, indeed, the more that you earn or have, the more you should give. I very much doubt that Zacchaeus's 50% would be enough for a hedge fund manager and some have argued, not without reason, that the 99% of their wealth that Bill and Melinda Gates have given is still not enough relative to what remains. After all, amongst many other assets, they still own a house valued at $150 million. But that is carping: if every one of the 1,000 or so billionaires who have, between them, over 4 trillion dollars was only a fraction as generous as the Gates, death by poverty could be eliminated tomorrow.

So to whom should you give? Andrew Carnegie who made the equivalent of over $300 billion dollars at the end of the nineteenth century and then retired to spend the last third of his life giving it away, and Bill Gates who is doing much the same thing with considerably less now, agreed that it is as important to whom you give to as how much. I would argue that it is hard to reduce suffering more than by preventing people, and particularly children, dying from poverty, but you might have your own views on what the best uses of your money might be. For instance, Carnegie gave his wealth away mainly to educational charities. To help you decide the World Health Organisation has developed a metric by which charitable impact can be assessed: it's a hard-hearted economist's cost-benefit analysis which ranks every intervention by how many years of disability adjusted life expectancy it adds – the best interventions, such as inoculating children against the parasitic worms that carry many tropical diseases, are up to 10,000 times more effective than the worst. The best-targeted interventions can save a life for a little over £100. What used to be "donate and hope that a dictator doesn't steal it" has become a science with organisations such as Give Well ranking charities by their effectiveness.

Buddha said "Set your heart on doing good. Do it over and over again, and you will be filled with joy." Neuroscience agrees, measuring increases in activity in those areas of the brain associated with pleasure when subjects are asked to imagine giving money away anonymously. In a survey of 30,000 households those that gave money to charity were 43% more likely to say they were very happy than those that did not.

Life is more than consuming products and generating waste. Whilst I have been speaking, 250 children have died from preventable, poverty-related causes, something that, in this world of material affluence, is nothing short of a moral outrage. At the end of your life you will want to look back and be able to say that you've lived it well: part of that is doing your best to make the world a happier place. So, please give, give as much money and time to reduce suffering as you can afford, to whatever cause you are passionate about. It's the right thing to do and you'll be happier for it.

Ownership and Responsibility:

Economics and Faith, Sermon 4

Professor Judith Lieu, Robinson College 5th February 2012

Leviticus 25:8-24.

VV.23-24

In SCR musing whether adage still true that could walk from Cambridge to London and never leave land owned by Trinity College. If so for them, and perhaps for Robinson as we consider complicate patterns of land ownership in Cambridge, the implications of this chapter of Leviticus would be too dreadful to contemplate. Land cannot be sold in perpetuity; every fifty years it reverts to its original owners. The same is true for individuals; if through fecklessness, or natural disaster, or personal tragedy someone becomes so enmired in debt that the only way to satisfy their creditors is to sell themselves or their family members — no official receivers or personal bankruptcy in those days — then when the 50th year comes round they regain their freedom and return again to their restored family land. This is the Jubilee, and in a year celebrating the Queen's Diamond Jubilee we should remember that the term entered the English language through this chapter of Leviticus: the Jubilee is the 50th year marked by the blowing of the ram's horn; in v. 10 'proclaiming liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants'.

The idea of the 50th year builds on the idea of the sabbatical year; just as human beings celebrate a weekly pattern of labour and renewal so must the land be given a pattern of productivity and renewal, 6 years of being toiled and one year rest. There is historical evidence for the observance of the sabbatical year, not as a cycle of letting different fields lie fallow but as a fixed calendrical pattern, but that the fiftieth year was routinely observed is far less certain, and we may not be surprised. While the 7th and therefore the 49th year could be prepared for through planning and self-seeding, an immediately following 50th year could surely prompt the hardship which would send half the population back into debt-slavery — although the chapter would suggest that such fears betray a lack of trust in God.

And that is where this chapter is so important; because it projects a vision and it provokes a whole series of questions about the relationship between humankind and the land on which our prosperity depends, and about the relationship between human beings and the labour we expend to the benefit of each other. This vision and these questions are not spelt out; perhaps that is the purpose of any Utopia, which in a sense this is, to provoke us to imagine how else things might be.

Behind it all is the conviction that the people take possession of the land as gift and not as right, and that it remains gift and not right. As each cycle turns everyone rediscovers their place as the recipient of gift, on an equal footing with all other recipients, restored to the beginning. The line is a fine one, and in Jewish and in Christian tradition gift has all too frequently become right. This is the land God gave us and so we have the right to defend it by force, and to take more of it from others; this is the prosperity God has given me because God loves me or because I am more gifted or more obedient or more righteous than others, and so I have the right to it, whereas those without are evidently less gifted in every sense of the word. I have earned what I have got; it is mine by right. Google 'properity Gospel' and you will see what I mean. An interpretation of the Christian Gospel that claims that since God will the well-being of all people, to use every effort to secure one's own prosperity is diviney-approved and success demonstrates divine favour, failure some lack of spiritual virtue. Grievously wrong and dangerous.

‘With me you are but aliens and tenants’ says verse 23. Givenness demands recognition of dependency, an obligation to awareness of the giver, a realisation of vulnerability. It is no accident that this chapter is imaginatively located as Israel struggle through the Wilderness anticipating the Promised Land, and that it was probably put into writing in a period when the people were subjected to foreign empires, and living in or remembering exile away from the land. They knew what it was to be aliens, dispossessed; possession was a dearly sought vision, but ion one sense it is never totally attained.

The land is of course the fundamental source of livelihood. Each person depends on the land; it is a symbol of the resources for survival and also for prosperity. No doubt when this chapter was written economic structures were more complex than that, and indeed later in the chapter provision is made for the difference between the urban and rural settings. Yet again the underlying conviction is one that has often been forgotten although now is being recovered. Human beings may work the earth, draw from it the resources for life and for civilisation, but in so doing they must recognise the mutuality of that relationship. In the contemporary discourses of human rights and identity we speak of acknowledgement of alterity, respect for the inalienable ‘otherness’ of the other, and the same attitude is true here towards the land and all it represents. It is not there to be exploited and exhausted to destruction, just as other human beings are not there for them or their labour to be bought and sold generation after generation. The leaving fallow not just for the 49th but also for the 50th year is a radical symbol of recognition of our dependency, and of respect for the integrity of the world in which we find ourselves.

Verse 24 ‘Throughout the land you hold you shall provide for the redemption of the land.’ Redemption here is not some spiritual feel-good but a search for the land also to be liberated from abuse and exhaustion. Human beings are under obligation to include this goal in all their activities. This is a declaration of the interdependency of human beings and the rich resources of a world that sustains them. For there is here the challenge to trust that if we risk surrendering but for a moment the human impulse to exploit to the limits, there may yet be enough to live on, for all to live on. One of the theological sources of this vision is the story of the God who brings the people out of slavery into possession of the land, the other is the conviction that the whole created order owes its being to God, and that it is not haphazard but shaped with integrity and wholeness, sealed by a God who also observed a 7th day of rest.

And that too brings us back to relationships with one another; because in the face of the risk of the 50th year, returned to one’s own land, and with stored resources depleted, all are equally vulnerable, and so perhaps equally dependent on openness to each other. The parable read from Luke’s Gospel is commonly known as the Parable of the Rich Fool, but mere folly is not the point of the tale. The lead character has not, we may say, taken heed of the message of the Jubilee year. Filling ever yet greater barns, he assumes that all that he has is his to enjoy in perpetuity, and that he has no other obligations to God or to his fellow human beings. Suddenly divested of those layers of protection, by death or by the regular reminder of the Jubilee cycle, he is left bereft, ignorant that he has throughout been called into recognition of his dependency on God.

In all this the point of the 50th year is not that once in a lifetime, if that by ancient reckonings of life expectancy, one needs a ‘reality check’ but that the shadow of the 50th year changes the meaning of all the years in between. Years are counted from then and to then; the ownership and use of land, buying and selling all are done in awareness of the truth of the Jubilee. And yet, even so, one works the land, buys and sells, improves the soil, educates the offspring of the enslaved, even in the knowledge that they and not you will ultimately benefit therefrom.

Last week I think Simon read the story that open’s Luke’s account of the ministry of Jesus: ‘he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour’. Behind the chapter of Isaiah which these verses recalled lies the chapter of Leviticus which we have read. The year of the Lord’s favour is the year of the jubilee, and the release for the captives and the freedom for the oppressed are not an

impossible promise reserved for the distant future, still less a spiritual uplift for those oppressed by sin. They are the trumpet call of the jubilee with all its rootedness in the social and economic practices of the present. The words are not only to be heard by those same captives and oppressed but by all, because everyone has to respond to the declaration of the Year.

That means that the needs of the poor, the captives, and the oppressed do not have to be met because they are poor, captive, and oppressed, and so deserve our pity, we who are rich, free, and able to exercise our will and rights. The declaration of the freedom for them is not something which we are invited to approve and pray for but is something that will impinge on what we consider our rights, our ability to decide to give or not to give. Rather release and freedom is as much their right as it is ours, and it as much a gift given us as it is a gift given them.

Such a vision is not one to be swiftly turned into economic policy, and perhaps it never was. The chapter has no interest in economic theory. If taken seriously as the principle for charitable giving in the church and outside the consequences would be far reaching. Charity would no longer be based on and reaffirm the division between we who can give, and they who are dependent on our generosity, but would be an act of humble restoration. At a time when many resent the aid given to other nations in a time of our economic hardship, it questions responses that defend such aid in terms of our security and equally those that frequently tie aid to our own values and economic benefit.

What this chapter does suggest is that the politics of ownership and economic distribution are not to be measured by likely or proven outcomes, instead they imply a fundamental understanding of what it is to be human. What is it to be human, what is it to be in relation to other humans, what is our relationship with the resources before us; these are economic questions just as they are philosophical, theological questions.

Kimberly K. Jenne

Transfiguration Sunday (Year B), February 19, 2012

Mark 9:2-9

Sermon Title: Truth in Advertising

Words have power.

Words have power. As a lover of words, even as a young person, I soon realized how powerful language could be. Language could be used to shower affection on a favorite pet. It could be used to frighten those sitting around a campfire. It could be used to bring tears to the eyes of little sisters. Language is a powerful and odd phenomenon.

For the better part of ten years I found myself participating in a fairly important part of the economy, namely that of helping generate demand. I spent my career prior to answering a call to the ministry in advertising – taking my love of words and shaping them into creative campaigns that would encourage trial, reconsideration and repeat purchase. The lessons I had learned as a child – that language was powerful, eliciting emotion – grew into a career selling a variety of consumer products. I watched simple, yet manipulative tactics work in increasing market share for brands. The right beer gets you the right girl and the right life. The right iPhone app can "take you anywhere or be anything." Advertising works. Carefully crafted words designed to create a worldview that the brand wants to project. Connect that worldview with a need, and you could create desire, which turns into demand. Advertising worked. Words contained power.

At the same time, I also taught courses at the university about media literacy. Every time I would survey new students about the impact of advertising on their lives, they would say that advertising had no or very little impact on their purchase behavior. "I buy what I like." "Advertising doesn't work on me." I would laugh to myself because I knew advertising worked based on the sales numbers I looked at every week. Yet, very few people were willing to admit that the words and images they consumed every week had power over their lives.

Advertising claims to have power, but it is manipulated power, false power.

On the Sundays after Epiphany we traditionally explore the various signs of Christ's manifestation of God. Today marks the Transfiguration, where we focus on the awe and wonder of Christ's glory hidden from the eyes of the world, yet revealed to the eyes of the faithful who know his suffering, death, and resurrection. Traditionally this feast is celebrated on August 6, as is still the case with Roman Catholic Church and Church of England. As one from the Methodist tradition, we celebrate the Transfiguration on the last Sunday before Lent since it marks the transition from Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing in Galilee to his ministry of sacrifice in

Jerusalem.

At first glance, it might appear that our Gospel lesson has very little to do with economic justice, but as Fellow Judith Lieu reminded us just a couple weeks ago, much of the Bible has to do with socio-political realities. The Transfiguration is no different. Despite its cosmic qualities, it relates directly to the faith journey and experiences of God's people right now. In fact, my claim is that the revelation of Jesus as the Christ, as God, is more about our life in the here and now than our life in the hereafter. This story speaks to a truth that is as relevant to our world today as it was in the earthly days of Peter, James and John.

In our story, we find the three disciples traveling with Jesus up a mountainside and away from the crowds that continue to gather around him. This episode comes on the heels of hearing Jesus tell his disciples what had to have been a disturbing story. The Son of Man must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day rise again. We can only imagine the degree of wonderment and confusion to which Peter, James and John understood this particular news.

What words in our lives have true power?

According Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "We have moved to talking about efficiency (how to get what you want) and therapy (how to not feel bad about what you want). What is common to both is that they have more to do with the mentality of marketing (the stimulation and satisfaction of desire) than of morality (what ought we desire)."1 While we often are not willing to admit the power of advertising messages on our lives, it is a false power. Power based on manipulation and exploitation. And it is a power that limits our vision of the world around us, furthering the divide between people.

If we are honest with one another, most of us gathered in this room have lived good lives– what my friend calls – "lives of up and to the right." You know what I mean, right? If our lives were charted on a graph, it would indicate a steady projection of up and to the right – that is not to say there have not been challenges or low points along the way – but, for most of us sitting here, life has been kind to us. Opportunities have come our way. We have not lacked for clean water, food, or a bed in which to lay our heads. Our lives have been "up and to the right." And, when you think about that graph, as that red line continues to move up and to the right, it may become easy to forget about those lives that have an altogether different projection. Our consumerist culture counts on that forgetfulness. SOMETHING, SOMETHING

Yet, as Christians, we cannot claim ignorance. As we read and study and pray, our

gospel, as veiled as it is, becomes more and more clear. In the words of Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, the light that shines out of the darkness shines in our hearts and gives the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.2

The truth in advertising for the Gospel of Christ is that God cannot be used as an instrument for power and exploitation. We hear this most clearly when Jesus responds to Pilate in John's Gospel: "You say I am a king. Actually, I was born and came into the world to testify to the truth. All who love the truth recognize that what I say is true."3

The Story

Peter, James and John, together with Jesus, are walking one moment pondering Jesus' strange warning about the Son of Man rising from the dead after being betrayed, tortured and killed… And the next moment, Jesus is transfigured before them. His traveling clothes, dusty and sweaty as they must have been, become dazzling white. And Elijah and Moses appear and are talking to their Teacher. Peter, James and John are terrified. Peter comes up with a great plan to build some tents and stay up on the mountaintop as one big, happy family. And. Then. IT. Happened:

a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice,

'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'

An echo of an earlier experience. But, Peter, James and John hear the voice of God, naming Jesus as the Son, the Beloved and they know it is true.4 The disciples have been traveling with Jesus, have witnessed to his healings, his teachings, his bringing justice into their world. Peter has proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah.5 These are words with power, real power. In this moment, the truth of God's words becomes apparent.

What does it mean to proclaim that God's Son is among us?

What does it mean to proclaim God's Son is among us? What does it mean to proclaim Jesus as God in the midst of economic justice? WHAT NOW? What does the Transfiguration say about humanity?

This is why it is important to NOT only associate the story of the Transfiguration with divinity. Yes, this unveiling of Jesus as the Christ on that mountainside was an experience of the divine, but it was also most definitely an experience of humanity. It points to a reality that can no longer be denied. I believe the Transfiguration speaks to the human experience as strongly as it does to the heavenly realm. The moment of Transfiguration affirms the divinity of Christ – it is, in the words of one theologian, a Christophany – a manifestation of Jesus as the Messiah6 – but it does something more. It gives the disciples the eyes to see God's light in the chaos that is to

come – the death, the grief, the fear, the resurrection, and the difficult work of gathering the community together to move forward. As our epistle lesson from Paul says, when we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, the light shines out of the darkness giving the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. As Christians, when our lives are exemplified by the teaching of Jesus – fighting for the economic justice – scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, bringing down the powerful from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, and filling the hungry with good things – then the glory of God is made manifest here and now.7
The Transfiguration happens within us, slowly – bit by bit – here on earth. In the words of Charles Wesley's hymn, we sing, "scatter all my unbelief, more and more thyself display."8 And, one of the Church's prayers for the Transfiguration asks God that we might "be changed into his likeness from glory to glory." The kingdom of God breaks through here on earth give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

In three days time, our foreheads will be marked with ash as a sign of our mortality and repentance. We will enter the season of Lent following Jesus as he begins the long journey toward Jerusalem and the cross. We will need the Transfiguration – we will need Christ among us – as we begin that journey – as badly as the world needs us to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord so that the light shines out of darkness and the truth of Christ can be manifest on earth. Amen.

A Voice Crying in the Wilderness

Prof. Morna Hooker, Robinson 26/2/12

(Amos 5; Luke 3:1-18)

'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'

John the Baptist's opening words were clearly a pretty effective way to catch people's attention, but were hardly designed to win friends. Try them out in the Market square some time, and you will find that you are unlikely to attract a crowd. Shoppers and tourists alike will certainly notice you, but they will quickly conclude that you are a nutter, and that they don't wish to hear more.

Now there are two strange things about Luke's account of John the Baptist's preaching. The first is that it had an effect. Far from ignoring him, the crowds came to listen to him – and they took him seriously! 'What are we to do?' they asked him. Clearly he had them worried. And the second strange thing in the story is the sentence with which Luke rounds it off. 'In this and many other ways he made his appeal to the people and announced the good news'. 'Good news'? John has just told his audience that they are in danger of being thrown into the fire and being consumed, and Luke calls this 'good news'?

So what was going on? Luke's scene evokes stories from the OT of prophets delivering similar messages of judgement and doom. 'Thus says the Lord', they thundered, and almost invariably what followed was a condemnation of somebody for their behaviour. Just occasionally they brought a bid of good news – God would forgive them and pour out his blessing on them. Now John is talking just like one of the prophets, and he is behaving like them too, performing strange actions – in his case, dunking everyone who comes to hear him in the River Jordan. In Mark's account, John even looks like a prophet, dressed as he is in animal skins. So – here was a prophet, with an uncomfortable message. How should one react? In the past, of course, prophets had often been ignored, even mocked; but events had invariably proved that they were right. It would be wise, then, to take note of what John was saying.

What, then, was John's message? God's salvation was at hand! He was going to put everything right. Clearly that was a good thing for anyone who was suffering injustice But putting things right inevitably meant judgement for those who were opposing his will, or simply failing to live up to what was expected of them. Hence John demanded repentance. In Greek, that word means literally a 'change of mind', and so a 'turning around'. If you were going astray, you needed to turn right round and go in the opposite direction. If you set off from College to go to the Sidgwick site and turn left instead of right, you will soon need to repent if you wish to get to your destination. In John's view, the nation had gone astray.

Long before, on Sinai, God had called Israel to be his people; they were to be holy as he was holy: in other words, they were to be like him. If they trusted and obeyed him, then he would bless them. But it was no good being a nominal Jew; one needed to behave in the way that God demanded of his people. Trees that bore no fruit might as well be cut down and burned. And John appeared to have no doubt that his hearers were for the chop if they didn't reform.

So what was God like? And what did he require of his people? That had been summed up on Sinai long before in the ten commandments. Remarkably, after those which demanded that one should worship God alone,

and follow his example by resting every seventh day, the rest of the commandments were about how one treated other people. One must honour one's parents, refrain from murder, adultery, stealing, false witness and even from coveting. There were other commands, of course – 613 altogether, so it was said. Being 'holy' was apparently a complicated process! But which of these commandments was the most important? That was the question put to Jesus many years later, and his answer was that the first of the commandments was to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength; and the second, he said, was like it: it was to love one's neighbour as oneself. We may well think that this was cheating: Jesus has been asked for one commandment, and he has sneaked in a second. But the point is surely that the two go together and cannot be separated. You cannot truly love God without also loving your fellow men and women. Israel had been called to be like God, and he was a loving and a just God.

Loving God and loving others clearly belong together – but sadly many people just don't grasp that idea, which is why the OT prophets were for ever weighing in against their fellow-countrymen and demanding social justice. We heard one of them in our OT reading:

'You levy taxes on the poor

and extort a tribute of grain from them…

You bully the innocent…

and in court push the destitute out of the way.'

Yet the very people whom Amos addressed prided themselves on their devotion to God! Being 'religious' just wasn't enough, declared the prophet, for God takes no pleasure in their sacred ceremonies, and refuses to accept their offerings. 'I spurn your offerings,' cries God. 'Spare me the sound of your songs' – hard luck, Choir! – 'I shall not listen to the strumming of your lutes. But let justice flow down like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing torrent.'

Before the choir departs in high dudgeon, we must remind ourselves that Amos' point was not that beautiful worship in itself was wrong, but that empty worship was meaningless. Without justice, claims to love God were vain. To use John's metaphor, trees that bore no fruit might as well be cut down. What God did demand was that the people should 'Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the courts'.

Politicians frequently come out with sayings which are remembered – or misremembered – for years after the politicians themselves have ceased to have any influence. One such saying was Margaret Thatcher's 'There's no such thing as society'; and then there was Alastair Campbell's famous intervention at one of Tony Blair's news conferences: 'We don't do God', he said. Perhaps not, but those who claim to believe in God can never say 'We don't do politics', because faith in God is bound up with social justice. The God of the Bible is that sort of a God.

Again and again the psalmists had declared that God is a righteous God. Again and again the prophets had denounced injustice. So when the crowds came to John and asked 'What shall we do?' they should have known the answer.

He didn't urge them to remember to say their prayers or to offer the correct sacrifices; he didn't even rebuke them for being lazy or self-indulgent. John makes no mention of these things. Rather, he told them to remember the needs of their neighbours. And his demands, like those of the prophets before him, were radical in the extreme. Sitting on the side-lines, as we tend to do, we listen to his teaching, and from time to time we probably find ourselves saying 'Hear, hear!' Tax-collectors were even more unpopular in John's day than in our own, but for far more reason, for they were known to demand more than was proper, and to pocket the difference. 'Collect no more than the proper assessment' John tells them. No one should ask for more than was their due. And quite right too, we say – though these days our anger is more likely to be directed towards bankers. What, we wonder, would John have said today about those colossal bonuses? We can imagine him standing on the steps of St Paul's, putting the boot in and saying just what he thought about those with enormous salaries who claimed to be entitled to even more.

John obviously shook his hearers. Even some soldiers – not normally known to ask for orders from prophets – enquired as to what they should be doing. 'No bullying!' he commands them; it would seem that army life hasn't changed much in the past two thousand years! 'No blackmail; make do with your pay'. If John would be unpopular with bankers today, he would have been equally out of favour with the Trade Unions.

But some of John's teaching is a little closer to home. 'Whoever has two shirts must share with him who has none'. I think uneasily of my wardrobe, stuffed so full of clothes that it is difficult to squeeze in anything more, and remember how I was much too busy to fill the Salvation Army bag that came the other week. Should I not be doing more? 'Whoever has food must share with him who has none'. Should I really be enjoying a delicious meal in Hall, when millions go hungry? Every day I open the Hunger Site on my computer, and find it urging me to 'Help End Hunger', so I dutifully click in the correct box. But however often I click it I find that it makes no difference to the fact that someone dies of hunger somewhere in the world every couple of seconds. I must surely do more than this, and yet however much I give seems to be little more than a futile click in the face of this gigantic problem. The Bill Gates of this world may be able to do something that makes a difference, but what of the rest of us?

The apparent futility of all we do can easily lead us to despair. Was John simply 'a voice, crying in the wilderness' – in vain? But his message was not designed to make men and women despair; rather, it was intended to call on them to repent – to turn around, and adopt a new way of life. His message is described by Luke as 'good news'. He announces judgement, sure, but he also announces the coming of the Messiah, who brings renewal – and no sooner does he do so than Jesus appears, endorsing John's preaching, proclaiming God's rule on earth, and demonstrating in his teaching, his actions, his death and resurrection, precisely what love of neighbour means.

Injustice still flourishes, yes; the innocent are still bullied, yes; the rich still exploit the poor, and hunger is not yet abolished. Men and women seem as oblivious of the prophets' teaching as they ever were. But wherever they truly acknowledge the God of justice, they will do what they can, in whatever way is possible, to fight injustice and help those in need. And if we claim allegiance to this God, we can do nothing less.

Fair Trade

Dr Mark Hayes, 5th March, 2012

(Isa 58:1-9; Matthew 20:1-16)

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It's Fairtrade Fortnight and this is a Fairtrade college so it seems appropriate to talk about Fair Trade from a Christian perspective here tonight.

Fair Trade is about people using their spending power to improve the lives of the working poor. The Fairtrade Foundation helps people do this by licensing the use of its blue and green logo on products that meet Fair Trade criteria. Those criteria include a minimum price for the producers together with a premium that goes into social projects for their communities. Last year UK sales of Fairtrade products passed £1 billion for the first time. Those sales generated over £18 million of premium payments on top of minimum prices and altogether 1.2 million workers and farmers benefit from worldwide sales of Fairtrade products.

Our first reading (Isaiah 58:1-9) is uncomfortable for devout chapel-goers who take fasting seriously. Previous speakers in this term's series of talks have already emphasised the Bible's call to justice and Isaiah makes it clear that this is not an optional extra. Jesus himself, you may recall, announced at Nazareth at the outset of his ministry that he had come to fulfil this scripture. There is no room in Christianity for a private spirituality which ignores the plight of the poor and down-trodden, although I am not by any means advocating a purely social gospel. Fasting and penitence have their necessary place. Yet how are we to do justice?

One interpretation might be, don't give up chocolate for Lent, eat more — as long as it's Fairtrade! More seriously, we heard recently from the College Bursar about the importance, for the welfare of both society and the individual, of a radical commitment to giving. It is right that if we benefit from the rules and chances of the economic game, we should help those less fortunate. Yet we are also called to try and change the rules.

It is important to distinguish Fair Trade from giving. It has been a common misunderstanding, indeed accusation, that Fair Trade means paying over the odds. On the contrary, Fair Trade is not defined by the payment of a premium by the consumer but by the receipt of a premium by the producer. You can have the second without the first because there is a wide margin between consumer and producer prices, not all of which represents unavoidable costs. This is becoming increasingly clear as large companies switch entire product lines to Fairtrade. For example, Cadbury's and Co-operative chocolate, Sainsbury's and Co-operative bananas, Waitrose tea, or the vanilla in Ben & Jerry's ice cream. Fairtrade is about changing the way we do business and changing the balance of power in favour of the working poor. That is where the controversy begins, because unlike philanthropy, Fairtrade challenges the conventional wisdom that business and charity must be kept separate. Ultimately, it challenges the very structure of power and trade relations.

I have a personal stake in Fairtrade. Nearly 20 years ago, on 2 July 1992, in a dingy office in the West End of Newcastle upon Tyne with bars on the windows to keep out the local bandits, Richard Adams and I signed the memorandum of association forming the Fairtrade Foundation. My draft of the principal object of the Foundation

was simply “to relieve poverty by encouraging the purchase on beneficial terms of the fruits of the labour of poor people in any part of the world”. The challenge we then faced was to persuade the main development agencies, OXFAM, Christian Aid and CAFOD, together with the Charity Commission itself, that such an activity was charitable in law. This was not an easy task: charities rarely engage in trade as a principal activity, profit-making companies benefit in marketing terms from the label, it was even argued that someone in work in a developing country could no longer be considered poor. Fortunately, at least on this occasion, the Charity Commission deals in law and not conventional wisdom, and with the help of Andrew Phillips, now Lord Phillips, the Foundation was registered as a charity and its remarkable success story began.

If you want to know why the conventional wisdom is that you should not mix business and charity, just consider our second reading (Matthew 20:1-16). It is hard to imagine a better recipe for confusion and bad industrial relations than the example of our generous vineyard owner. The economists will surely point out that the sequel to this story must have been a catastrophic fall in wine production, as next day all the workers hang back until the eleventh hour and hardly any work gets done.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard has been interpreted from many angles and not usually at face value. Yet, while outrageous in business terms and clearly deliberately provocative, it does carry a serious economic message, namely that anyone willing to work is entitled to a living wage. To each according to his need, not just according to his work. And this sheds some light on the essential nature of Fair Trade.

I have already emphasised that Fair Trade is not to be confused with giving. The Fairtrade contract does indeed provide for a social premium to be paid into a community fund. Yet of equal, perhaps greater, significance is the minimum price for the product, a price intended to allow the producer to earn a living wage and to plan ahead.

The core of Fair Trade is not the ethical consumer or the Fairtrade label, important as they both are. The core is the associations of small farmers and other workers who had organised themselve to improve their bargaining power many years before Fairtrade labelling was invented. What the label provided was a mechanism through which these workers’ organisations could reach out directly to consumers who agreed that every worker should be able to feed, clothe and educate their children, receive a minimum standard of healthcare and build a better life for themselves.

As Fairtrade grew into industries that are not organised co-operatively, the Fairtrade contract began to provide support for improved terms and conditions for plantation and factory workers, including the right to collective bargaining. In other words, Fairtrade is about the balance of power between workers and employers and has more in common with trade unionism, minimum wages and the Factories Acts than it does with philanthropy. It is indeed a matter of economic justice.

This, of course, is anathema to neoliberal economists. They oppose Fair Trade for the same reasons they oppose minimum wages, trades unions, and most other forms of ‘interference with the free market’, as they would put it. These economists continue to argue in the Classical fashion that underemployment is, at root, the fault of the workers, not of the economic system as a whole. The Cambridge economist John Maynard Keynes’s careful refutation of the Classical theory of employment in a monetary economy has been ignored, not because it is technically wrong, but because of its radical implications, both for society and for the way we understand and use economic theory. And that is why I am now an academic economist: my personal battle continues on the field of ideas.

Yet a note of caution is in order. All human institutions are provisional and vulnerable to human weakness in its many forms. Fair Trade is not the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Catholic social teaching does indeed encourage freedom of association by workers and as wide as possible a distribution of economic power in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. Yet power can always be misused, at any level. Indeed Catholics, of all people, are painfully aware of the consequences of the abuse of power by a tiny minority of our own clergy. The experience of the 1960s and 1970s in this country led to a profound mistrust of unions, sometimes justified. The miners' strike of the 1980s has left deep scars and divisions across the North of England.

Where Fairtrade has a particular strength from this perspective is that it extends solidarity beyond the groups of workers themselves to include the solidarity of the consumer. Consumers would not support Fairtrade long if the leaders of producer organisations, or indeed of the Fairtrade Foundation, lost sight of their original purpose and pursued their own personal advantage. The first remedy, as always, is transparency. And indeed the Foundation is required by its memorandum of association to research and report on its activities and regularly does so, warts and all. As a legal charity, the Foundation must act in the public interest and furthermore its trustees are themselves appointed by development charities. So we can hope that this unique exercise in mixing business with charity will not degenerate into being captured by special interests. On the contrary, it is a glimpse of what it takes to make a good society.

Fair Trade works. Don't let any economist persuade you otherwise. Free enterprise is an excellent thing within proper limits, the challenge is to redefine those limits in order to attain a good society. Some of the most impressive entrepreneurs I have ever met are the leaders of workers' organisations. So be confident that you do make a difference by buying Fairtrade and don't worry about distorting the free market. The invisible hand, God's invisible hand, works through us.