

Mission and the Environment in a Finite World

Issue 28 Guest editor: Andy Kingston-Smith



We hear about environmental matters on a daily basis. Lord Mandelson recently had a sticky encounter with a protester who expressed her frustration that the democratic purpose did not appear to give her a voice with which to question the Government's handling of carbon emission reductions at its summit launch. She clearly feels passionate about it. Without wishing to advocate similar action, the question for us is posed; to what extent do we, as Christ's Kingdom representatives, feel passionate about issues of justice and ethical living? Is it actually important? Do we care? If not, why not?

This edition of Encounters reports from the annual Environment Day Conference held at Redcliffe College in January in conjunction with the John Ray Initiative, when the central issue presented for debate was "Just living: the quest for fairness in a finite world".

Dr Dewi Hughes writes two articles, extracted from his talk at the conference. He reminds us of God's blueprint for justice-based living through the model laid out in the Old Testament concept of Jubilee and through Jesus' radical Kingdom-ethics message delivered in the Beatitudes.

Peter Price-Thomas takes up the theme of God's "hidden" blueprint revealed in nature and poses some fascinating scenarios for us to consider before I wrap up with some missional responses to these, and other, perspectives. Sometimes it just takes a bit of lateral thinking and a good dosage of Holy Spirit-inspired boldness to get us jogging along the right track again!

When attending the very recent "Hope for Planet Earth" event in Cheltenham, I was encouraged to see the wider church addressing key issues on climate change, poverty/sustainable development and ethical questions of over-consumption and the need for "light living". Again, I will comment briefly on some of the issues raised.

May I encourage you to reflect critically on the issues raised in the articles and to carefully consider the questions and concerns posed. Finally, do respond however provoked... that is all we ask!

Andy Kingston-Smith, Assistant Lecture in Mission, Redcliffe College.

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Go to the Encounters website at www.redcliffe.org/encounters to read what others are thinking on the Discussion Board. Use the Voice your comments form to add to the debate.

*Please Note: The views expressed in articles are those of their authors
and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.*

Special Editorial

New editorial board and format for Encounters



Author: Dr Kang-San Tan, Head of Mission Studies, Redcliffe College.

Dear Encounters Readers

After almost five years as editors of Encounters, Rob Hay and Jonathan Ingleby have handed over their responsibilities to a new editorial team – Dr Kang-San Tan, Dr Rob Cook, Tim Davy (already part of the team) and Gillian Turner (assistant) – who will be carrying on the work and renewing the vision of the Journal.

The Journal will move from being bi-monthly to quarterly, appearing at the beginning of March, June, September and December. While this edition focuses on the environment, future editions will reflect on mission in Europe, Bible and mission and Asian mission movements.

We owe a great debt of gratitude to all that Rob and Jonathan have achieved in the last five years. I am sure you would want to join us in thanking them. We look forward to working with you, our readers, as we seek to continue their excellent work in promoting more and better reflection on God's mission in the world today. This is as urgent as it ever was.

Kang-San

Encounters Mission Ezine

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True Wealth (Part One: Old Testament)

God's blueprint for justice-based living



Author: Dr Dewi Hughes, Theological Advisor for Tearfund

Introduction

What does biblical flourishing (“development”) look like? This is a very good question, especially for those who work for relief and development agencies. Answering it should help to clarify our objectives.

It is not surprising that this question has not been high on the agenda of those who claim to focus on the poorest of the poor. Our focus is on providing the very basic necessities that are obviously needed in order to make any human flourishing possible at all – food, clean water, sanitation, employment with adequate remuneration, shelter, basic health care and education are obviously needs that must be met if human life is to flourish at all.

It does not take much imagination or many interviews with sufferers to conclude that people deprived of the most basic necessities are unhappy or that they experience a low level of subjective well being. I will never forget a father living in a Delhi slum saying bitterly in a Tearfund video that animals were better housed than he and his family – and that father and his family were unquestionably happier in the new home that they built with the help of a Tearfund partner.

The need to focus on the question of true wealth comes more into focus when we look at what is happening in the so-called “developed” countries - those countries whose economies have embraced market growth as their fundamental economic principle for improving the well-being of their people.

At one time, growth in GDP alone was seen as an indication of development in a country. In time this came to be seen as inadequate and the human development indicators [HDIs] were devised by the UN to measure infant mortality before the age of five, average life span and literacy. The HDIs were devised on the basis of the reasonable assumption that in countries where infant mortality is going down, people are living longer and an increasing number of people are literate, the general level of human well-being will be rising.

This did not mean that growth in GDP was abandoned; on the contrary, it continues as a key indicator of a healthy economy. This means that there is no limit to “development” so that Western countries have all gone way beyond the stage where all the basic needs of their citizens have been met and any halt in economic growth, such as the present recession [= negative growth], is experienced as a frightening threat to their well being by many people.

The market economics that has driven growth in GDP in Western and other nations that have adopted its principles, has undoubtedly removed more people from poverty than any other economic system in history. But in the last 20 years or so it has become more and more apparent that there is a fly in the ointment. It is now very clear that increasing wealth does not mean increasing happiness or subjective well being. Mark Easton, in a series on happiness broadcast by BBC2 in 2006, states:

“The proportion of people saying they are ‘very happy’ has fallen from 52% in 1957 to just 36% today. The opinion poll by GfK NOP for The Happiness Formula series on BBC Two provides the first evidence that Britain’s happiness levels are declining - a trend already well documented in the United States. Polling data from Gallup throughout the 1950s shows happiness levels above what they are today, suggesting that our extra wealth has not brought extra well-being. It could even be making matters worse. The British experience

mirrors data from America, where social scientists have seen levels of life satisfaction gradually decline over the last quarter of a century.”¹

It is not surprising, maybe, that politicians have also become aware of this agenda. David Cameron, in a BBC interview in 2006, said: “It’s time we admitted that there’s more to life than money, and it’s time we focused not just on GDP, but on GWB – general well-being.”

For political balance I end this section with a quote from Richard Layard, LSE professor, Labour peer and advisor on well-being to the Labour party: “Over the last 50 years, we in the west have enjoyed unparalleled economic growth. We have better homes, cars, holidays, jobs, education and above all health. According to standard economic theory, this should have made us happier. But surveys show otherwise.

When Britons or Americans are asked how happy they are, they report no improvement over the last 50 years. More people suffer from depression, and crime—another indicator of dissatisfaction—is also much higher. These facts challenge many of the priorities we have set ourselves both as societies and as individuals. The truth is that we are in a situation previously unknown to man.

When most people exist near the breadline, material progress does indeed make them happier. People in the rich world (above, say, \$20,000 a head per year) are happier than people in poorer countries, and people in poor countries do become happier as they become richer. But when material discomfort has been banished, extra income becomes much less important than our relationships with each other: with family, with friends and in the community. The danger is that we sacrifice relationships too much in pursuit of higher income.”²

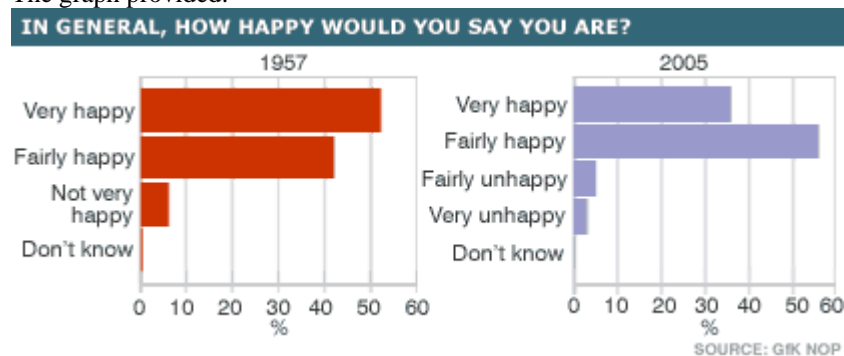
It seems that we are living in an opportune moment to describe and live a Biblical vision of human flourishing. There is a lot to say. I am going to look at four topics using and modifying material from my recently published book, *Power and Poverty*. I agree with those who see the Bible as the story of the revelation of God’s plan for the universe.

As the introduction to the recently approved Tearfund Statement of Faith says, “God’s plan for the universe is to bring about, through Jesus Christ, a transformed creation wholly governed by God, from which all evil and suffering will be banished and in which God will live with redeemed humanity for ever.”

Since the Biblical story is primarily a story of divine redemption, it is fair to assume that the portrayal of its culmination will be a portrayal of ideal human flourishing. So, I’m going to begin by looking at Revelation 21-22. I am then going to focus in on three stages in the story of redemption. First, I will look at the conditions on which God gave the land of Canaan to his

¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/happiness_formula/4771908.stm

The graph provided:



² http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=6761

people that he had redeemed from slavery in Egypt. Second, I'm going to look at the Beatitudes in which Jesus describes the character of a truly happy/blessed people.

Beginning at the End

In the vision of the new redeemed humanity described in Revelation 21:1 to 22:6, all will be rich in every sense – spiritually, socially, culturally, morally, physically... Maybe some will be “richer” than others, but all will be rich. Surely if that is what we are going to be, then it must be our aspiration to be something like that now. The three snapshots that I'm going to take from the history of redemption suggests strongly that that is indeed the case.

Israel's Tenancy Agreement

Look at just a few aspects of this topic.

The significance of the land for Israel

It was God who enabled the Israelites to take possession of the land. But having brought them into possession, he also claimed ultimate ownership that gave him the right to determine the terms on which Israel could continue to possess it. In the jubilee legislation, God declares that “the land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants”.³

Land, which is the most fundamental source of sustenance for humankind, could not be traded freely in the open market in Israel. It was lent as a sacred trust to the tribes, clans and families of the nation with conditions attached. This principle has profound implications for biblical economics. The most basic resource needed in order to produce wealth in an agrarian economy was not the absolute property of the owners to be disposed of as they saw fit. This means that any concept of private property in Israel cannot be divorced from a whole raft of social obligations.⁴

The right to use the land was given only to families/father's houses.⁵ A father's house was made up of all the living descendants of one living male ancestor. This could include the wife/wives, their sons and their wives, the son's sons and their wives and all unmarried girls. The ideal was that land should belong inalienably to father's houses.⁶

Naboth's response to Ahab's offer to buy his vineyard or to give him a better one somewhere else illustrates how deeply ingrained this principle had become in the hearts of the people – “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers”.⁷

Christopher J.H. Wright comments: “The Lord did forbid it. This piece of land was not really Naboth's to give, sell or exchange. He held it in trust from the Lord for the benefit of his family. It was not just a question of ‘human rights’ or ‘natural justice’. It was a staunch upholding of the right of a member of the Lord's people to maintain that part of the national inheritance which the Lord had assigned to his personal household.”⁸

³ Lev 25:23

⁴ This is also the case for the concept of private property in the New Testament.

⁵ It is clear from passages such as Judges 6:11 that the land belonged to the father's house so that this was the level at which there was communal ownership. The Levirate law in Deuteronomy 25 also reflects such a situation.

⁶ C.J.H.Wright, *God's people in God's Land*, Carlisle, Paternoster 1990, pp 44-58

⁷ 1 Kgs 21:3

⁸ C.J.H.Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, Leicester, IVP 2004, p. 90

Some laws that condition Israel's occupancy of the land

The two principles that God was the ultimate owner and that the families of Israel were to have a share of it in perpetuity are fundamental to the laws that conditioned Israel's occupancy of the land. Let us consider some of the specific tenancy laws and their implications for overcoming poverty in the Old Testament economy:

1. *The seventh year release of the land* - Ex. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:2-7; Deut. 15:1-11

The law in Exodus states that the land was to be released from cultivation in the seventh year. Whatever grew of itself was available to the poor and the wild animals. In a sense, ownership of the land reverted to God who then made it equally available to all the people and to the wild animals.

The Leviticus passage underlines that reaping was forbidden.⁹ The family who normally cultivated the land were allowed, with the poor and wild animals, to use what grew of itself for their immediate needs, but they had no greater rights to such produce than the poor or the animals. Like the poor, for this special year, even the owner's enjoyment of the fruit of the land was for subsistence and not profit. Patrick Fairbairn's observation on this law is still valid:

"Such an institution was utterly opposed to the niggardly and selfish spirit which would mind only its own things, and would grind the faces of the poor with hard exactions or oppressive toil, in order to gratify some worldly desires. No one could imbibe the spirit of the institution without being as distinguished for his humanity and justice toward his fellow-men, as for his piety toward God."¹⁰

Whereas in Exodus and Leviticus the land was to be released from cultivation and made available for common use in Deuteronomy the focus was on "release" from debt.¹¹ The Hebrew root *šmt*, meaning "to release", is used in both Exodus and Deuteronomy.¹² This suggests that there was a direct link between releasing the land from cultivation and releasing debtors.

The probable scenario in view here is a farmer having to borrow from a neighbour in order to survive the hungry months as many subsistence farmers still do today. The only way the debtor could repay was by pledging a proportion of future crops, which practically meant giving a parcel of land to the creditor as security against the loan. Such loans could be paid over a number of years. What the law of release from debt did was to put a limit on the number of years a debt could be carried. This would mean that the type of loan in view here would always be negotiated with the seventh year release in view.

For example, if a loan had to be taken out the year after the Sabbath year, repayment could be agreed over six years. However, the beauty of the law for the debtor was that if the debt had not been paid in full by the seventh year then it was to be cancelled. The seventh year was clearly an ideal year to do this because no creditor could expect to receive any payment from a debtor in the year when the land was not to be cultivated for profit.

Some scholars have argued that the debt cancellation was only for the Sabbath year and that the debtor would be expected to continue to pay the debt once the Sabbath year was over. Free market interpreters are particularly fond of this interpretation!¹³ However, it seems

⁹ Lev 25:5

¹⁰ Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture*, 6th ed. Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, Vol 2, p.464

¹¹ Deut. 15:1

¹² See C.J.H. Wright, *New International Biblical Commentary, Deuteronomy*, Massachusetts, Hendrickson, 1996, pp. 187-8

¹³ See E. Calvin Beisner, *Prosperity and Poverty*, Illinois, Crossway Books, 1988, pp. 58ff

difficult to understand vs. 9 if this was the case: “Be careful not to harbour this wicked thought: ‘The seventh year, the year for cancelling debt is near’, so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing.”

It is very clear from this verse that the closer the seventh year when the loan was made the greater the risk. When there were five years left to repay a loan, then the creditor could expect the debtor to be able to pay a good proportion of the loan before the Sabbath year. It would be unlikely that the debtor would have a whole series of bad harvests.

If there was only one harvest between taking out the loan and the Sabbath year the risk for the creditor was much greater. Vs. 9 only makes sense if there was a risk. If a debtor was expected to resume paying the debt after the Sabbath year there would be no risk. It is not surprising, therefore, that Jewish interpreters have understood the debt cancellation of the Sabbath year as absolute.

This interpretation is also consistent with the relational view of justice that is found in the law. Under God the well-being of the families of Israel was paramount. When someone went into debt in order to survive, the key justice issue was not that the debtor should pay the creditor in full, but how to restore the debtor to a place of respect in the clan or tribe with dignity intact.

More often than not loans would be made to fellow clan members so they were not to be seen by the creditor as an opportunity for personal or family gain but as an opportunity to restore a brother in need. The ideal was not for some to become rich at the expense of others, but for all to enjoy their land inheritance in the presence of God. This relational emphasis is also the driving force in the law on interest.¹⁴

2. The ban on interest - Ex 22:25; Lev 25:35-38; Deut 23:19-20.

In Exodus 22:25 the law that forbids charging interest on a loan is one of a series of laws dealing with the protection of defenceless and disadvantaged people. They are, as always in the Old Testament, the immigrants, widows, orphans and the needy. God says: “If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest.”

God expected his people to have a strong social conscience and to care for one another. The verse presupposes a situation where some Israelites will have more than they need while others will find themselves in need. In such a situation the moneylender sees the vulnerability of the needy as an opportunity for gain.

This is not how God expects his people to behave towards each other. He expects the true Israelite to see a brother and do everything possible to help. As we have already seen from Deuteronomy making a risky loan may be required to restore a brother with dignity. Here the Israelites with means to help are commanded to make interest free loans to their needy brothers.

The ban on charging interest in Leviticus 25:35-38 is found in the middle of the law of Jubilee that not only deals with the return of land to the families that had been originally granted it but with how to help fellow Israelites who were sinking deeper and deeper into the mire of poverty.

The “countryman” or “brother” in verses 35-38 is on the second step down from being able to hold his own on the inheritance given his family by God. The first step would have been to give up some land as security for a loan [vs. 25-28]. In these verses the brother has taken

¹⁴ The Jubilee Centre in Cambridge, England has a lot of resources in its website www.jubilee-centre.org in which the relational characteristics of the law are applied to various aspects of contemporary life. Many of the resources can be downloaded freely.

the next step down, lost his land and needs a loan to survive as a paid worker. The next step down was to sell himself into bonded servanthood to a fellow Israelite and the final step down is debt slavery to a non-Israelite [vs. 39-53]. It is interesting that the encouragement here is to treat the poor brother as well as “an alien or a temporary resident”.¹⁵

The aim of helping the poor brother was “so that your countryman may continue to live among you” [vs.35]. The idea is that he and his family may be able to preserve their place among the families of Israel. Since these verses come in the middle of the Jubilee laws the ultimate aim was to preserve the countryman’s family on the land that was God’s inheritance to them.

This idea of everyone having their place and dignity in society is very striking. The well-being of the community was paramount and was to be put before any desire for personal profit and enrichment. To put profit before people by charging interest on a loan to a poor brother would be tantamount to insulting God and showing a total lack of respect for God – “fear your God, so that your country man can continue to live among you” [vs. 36].

Interest was not to be charged on loans of money or food [vs. 37] and the law was backed up by the reminder of God’s grace in rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt [vs. 38]. The God who rescued the Israelites from their profound bondage expected the better off among his people to be generous in their help to fellow Israelites in deep trouble.¹⁶

In Deuteronomy 23:19-20 the ban on charging interest to a fellow Israelite is unconditional because there is no indication that the ban only applies when the fellow Israelite is poor. This does not mean necessarily that the application of the law found in Exodus and Leviticus is being broadened. In an agrarian society, with an originally equitable division of land, most loans would be made to relieve poverty.

The thrust of the law here, as in the other passages, is probably to stop people exploiting the poor in their desperation. However, it is worth remembering that in response to these texts the Christian church was very opposed to charging interest on loans for most of its history.

3. **Jubilee** – Leviticus 25:8-55

Both the laws already considered are incorporated into the Jubilee legislation in Lev. 25. There is no certainty about the etymology of “Jubilee” but what was meant to happen in the Jubilee year is clear. It was the seventh in a cycle of seven years that was to be characterised by two blessings - liberty from debt bondage and return to the original inheritance given to each family or father’s house when Canaan was first possessed by the Israelites. *Liberty* or *freedom* and *return* or *restoration*, are the key concepts of the Jubilee.

The Jubilee defined the method of buying and selling land in Israel [vs. 14-16]. It made it impossible to sell land absolutely. What a purchaser bought when buying land was really a lease that gave him the right to use the land for a number of years the maximum number being the number between the time of the purchase and the next jubilee. The maximum length of any lease would have been 42 years, that is, the 49 years between Jubilees minus 7 Sabbath years of the land.

Theoretically this system ruled out profiteering from the purchase of land because it made it impossible to take advantage of the poor by buying land cheaply and then selling at a higher price before the lease ran out. There would be a set value for a set number of crops so if

¹⁵ Some idea of how they were to be treated can be seen in: Ex 22:21; 23:9,12; Lev 19:10,33-34; 23:22; Deut 10:19; 24:19-21.

¹⁶ There are many references to the Exodus as an encouragement to obedience to God’s laws e.g. Lev 19:36; 22:32-2; Deut 5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18,22. Obedience to the law is a result of redemption and not its cause.

someone came along to redeem the land for the original owner he would only have to pay the set value of the crops remaining on the lease. Here again the Israelites were encouraged to put the inclusive well being of the whole clan before their own comfort because that is what the Lord their God required of them: “Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the Lord your God.” [vs. 17].

What God demanded was very challenging especially if the commentators who believe that the Jubilee year followed a Sabbath year of the land are correct. That would mean almost three years without a harvest. God promises to provide enough in the year when cultivation took place before the Jubilee to last for three years [vs. 18-22].

Keeping God’s covenant would require real faith and trust in God’s provision. The Jubilee meant a voluntary move in the direction of becoming poorer for the sake of the community and called for trust in God’s ability to provide.¹⁷ It called for the exercise of faith against reason.

It is in the Jubilee law that God asserts his ownership of the land as we noted earlier. What God did in the Jubilee year was to take possession of the land from the hands of his people and, as it were, gave it back to them again on the basis of the principle of equity that had determined his giving of the land to them in the first place. In this way he liberated those that were in bondage to debt and restored them to a place of dignity in the community of his people. In the context of the old covenant God himself took on the role of the ultimate redeemer.

The right to redeem lost land and lost freedom is a key way to liberation and restoration in the remainder of the chapter on the Jubilee [vs.25-55]. The structure of the laws linked to the Jubilee is clearly determined by the repetition of “If one of your countrymen becomes poor” [vs. 25, 35, 39 & 47]. The poverty of countrymen is to be the concern of all and especially of fellow clansmen.

The first way of redeeming land leased because of poverty would be through a relative buying it back for his kinsman. The order of kinsmen-redeemers was brother, uncle, cousin and any other kinsman or clan member [vs. 49].¹⁸

There is a debate as to whether the kinsman-redeemer bought back the land for the relative who had lost it or for himself. If the latter the relative and his family would then become tenants of the kinsman-redeemer – but only until the Jubilee. The law of Jubilee would be very significant in this case because it would mean that large land holdings would be impossible even within tribes and clans because land would have to be returned to the descendants of the original families at the Jubilee.

A second way to redeem would be for the one who had sold the right to use the land to prosper and acquire the means to buy it back. It is striking that a kinsman or an original owner had a right to buy back leased land and in both cases, as stated above, the purchaser was not allowed to sell the land back at an inflated price.

The kinsman or original owner was to pay only the value of the number of crops left in the lease. If neither a kinsman nor original owner had been able to redeem leased land then, when the Jubilee came, God himself became the kinsman. He took the whole land of Israel into his possession and restored all the families of Israel to the inheritance that had been granted to them when the land was first settled.

Not only was the Jubilee law relevant to the loss of land it was also relevant to the literal loss of freedom that often accompanies the slide into poverty. Without capital or land poor

¹⁷ As we shall see the same pattern of divine demand is repeated in the new covenant teaching of Jesus in Matthew 6:19-34.

¹⁸ Cf. Boaz in the story of Ruth.

Israelites had only themselves to offer as payment to a creditor in return for their survival.¹⁹ The lowest depth to which Israelites could sink would be to sell themselves into debt slavery to an immigrant [vs. 47]. Those that had sunk to such depths were to be well treated and were to be set free at the Jubilee when God intervened as their kinsman-redeemer [vs. 54].

John Hartley's final comment on the Jubilee legislation, which incorporates the law of the Sabbath year of the land and the ban against interest as well, sums up the radical implications of these laws for Israel's economic life: "The view of land ownership herein... is revolutionary. It does not promote the ownership of private property in a way that allows the rich to amass large tracts of land, displacing the poor, nor does it permit the speculative buying and selling of land that feeds inflation, which in turn increases poverty. Neither does this manifesto promote a social or common ownership of land. Instead, this legislation prescribes a classless society in which each family has an inalienable ownership of a plot of land. It promotes responsible work that attends ownership of property, and at the same time it promotes responsible brotherhood of all Yahweh's people arising from their faith in Yahweh. Those who are more prosperous assist their poorer brothers, raising them to their own level, because they fear Yahweh. Kinsman helps kinsman, neighbor helps neighbor to face and to overcome economic hardship. Greed and covetousness are broken."²⁰

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¹⁹ See 2 Kgs 4:1-7

²⁰ Hartley, John E., *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 4: Leviticus*, (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher) 1998.

Author: Dr Dewi Hughes, Theological Advisor for Tearfund.

The Character of the Blessed Community of the Kingdom – the Beatitudes

It is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that the kingdom of God is the central theme of the sermon. The Beatitudes are a sort of prologue describing the characteristics of kingdom people with the first and final Beatitude eliciting the promise that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven”.¹

The main block of the sermon is introduced by the section on Jesus' relationship to the Law and the Prophets that ends with the statement that a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law is needed for entrance into the kingdom of heaven.² In the section on prayer we are instructed to pray for the coming of the kingdom and in the section on our attitude towards material things to seek God's kingdom and righteousness before anything else.³

Then in the concluding section Jesus says that entrance into the kingdom is conditional on doing the will of the Father, which is explained as putting the words of the Sermon on the Mount into practice.⁴ This final reference is conclusive proof that the Sermon on the Mount was meant to be an ethic by which kingdom people are expected to live in their everyday lives.

It may be stating the obvious but we need to be reminded that kingdom language is political language. What is in view in the Sermon on the Mount is a method of government that is characteristic of the “realm” of God.

It is also interesting that the best known statement of the ethics of the kingdom that Jesus came to establish begins with a declaration of blessing just as the establishment of the old covenant with Abraham was also steeped in “blessing”.⁵ Blessedness is promised to those that have a number of inward dispositions that are worked out in specific actions.

Before turning to the individual beatitudes, it is important to emphasise that the various dispositions and actions that lead to blessedness do not describe different individuals but the rounded character of kingdom people.

The poor in spirit

The Beatitudes begin by declaring the blessedness of the poor in spirit. It is now popular to argue against spiritualising this reference to the poor. The Beatitudes that are found in Luke where Jesus simply says “Blessed are you who are poor” are referred to as evidence. But it is clear that Jesus is making a different point in Luke's account.⁶

¹ Mt 5:3b cf. 10b. When referring to the kingdom Matthew sometimes say ‘kingdom’ simply as in 4:23. More often than not he has ‘kingdom of heaven’, as he does here, which reflects the contemporary reluctance to use the divine name. On some occasions he has ‘kingdom of God’ as in Mt 12:28. The 3 ways of referring to the kingdom are synonymous.

² Mt 5:17-20. Vs. 20 forms an *inclusio* with 7:12 to form the main body of the sermon.

³ Mt 6:10, 33.

⁴ Mt 7:21, 24.

⁵ Gen 12: 2-3

⁶ Lk 6:20. The relationship between Matthew's ‘Sermon in the Hills’ and Luke's ‘Sermon on a Level Place’ is complex. It is not impossible that both evangelists record material from the same occasion on which the sermon was delivered. There is also the possibility that as a very busy itinerant preacher Jesus used the same material on

In Luke, Jesus is directly addressing his disciples in the second person in a very relevant way because they had chosen the path of voluntary poverty in forsaking their means of earning a living when they followed him. There Jesus is saying that those who have responded to his call to forsake all to follow him are truly blessed.

Here in Matthew, Jesus is making a more general point about the attitude of the truly blessed. They are those who see that they are impoverished within and that they need God to lift them up. They are the opposite of proud. This is certainly a way of understanding the meaning of poverty that had become common in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms.

This more “spiritual” understanding of poverty is also more consistent with the Old Testament because it never views poverty as a blessing in and of itself but as an evil result of sin. It so happens that the majority of people that have confessed their inward poverty before God throughout the ages have not been the wealthy and powerful ones of the world but the poor.⁷

But it is also the case that not all the physically poor are poor in spirit. To be poor in spirit is to be in a spiritual state that transcends literal poverty and wealth but that has an impact on both.

The poor are raised up in their spirit, which more often than not marks the beginning of a journey away from literal poverty; the rich when they become poor in spirit are humbled and begin to move in the direction of divesting themselves of their wealth for the benefit of the poor.

The key point that needs to be made is that both the poor and the wealthy need to become poor in spirit and that their doing so is a crucial step in the direction of literally blessing the poor.

Those who mourn

A common perspective in commentators who live in rich countries is that they are not people who are sad because of bereavement but the repentant. They are people sorrowing because of their own sin and the sin of others that is causing such a lot of pain and grief in the world.⁸

Leon Morris comments: “Perhaps we should bear in mind that typically the worldly take a light-hearted attitude to the serious issues of life, a fact that is very evident in our modern pleasure-loving generation ... Because they do not grieve over what is wrong in themselves, they do not repent; and because they do not grieve over the wrong they share with others in the communities in which they live, they take few steps to set things right. Because they are

different occasions and that Matthew’s and Luke’s material comes from memory of the use of similar material on different occasions.

⁷ Hagner commenting on this phrase says that ‘the subject of the first beatitude refers to the frame of mind characteristic of the literally poor. Thus, by the added “in spirit,” Matthew or the tradition before him has not “spiritualized” the Lukan (and probably original) form of the beatitude... He too means the literally poor, but he focuses on their psychological condition or frame of mind. The poor are almost always poor in spirit; the poor in spirit are almost always the poor... In Israel, especially in the post-exilic period, poverty and piety often went together, the poor... having no other recourse than their hope in God. The poor were driven to complete reliance upon God, and the righteous poor were thought especially to be the objects of God’s special concern (cf. Pss 9:18; 33[34]:18; 40:18; Isa 57:15; Jas 2:5).’ That king David thought of himself among the righteous poor suggests that Hanger’s position is not entirely water tight – see Ps 40:17 cf. 70:5. Hagner, Donald A., *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 33a: Matthew 1-13*, (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher) 1998

⁸ See Psalm 119:136; Ezekiel 9:4; Luke 19:41-42; Philippians 3:18

not moved by the plight of the poor and the suffering, they make no move to help the world's unfortunates.”⁹

I am very conscious that I am in danger of only representing the perspective of the oppressor here. In the quotation from Leon Morris, the focus is entirely on the repentance of those that have the means to do something about the sin of poverty.

But what about the mourning of those that are poor and that are always going to be in the majority in the kingdom of God if my understanding of poverty of spirit is correct? What does it mean for them to mourn?

Even the poor need to repent of their rebellion against God but the sorrow that they feel because of their poverty is different to the sorrow that rich people feel because of the poverty of the poor. The poor mourn their condition while looking to God for justice with the assurance of the long revelatory tradition that he will vindicate their cause.

Mary gives powerful expression to this Old Testament hope as an integral aspect of the rule of the Messiah when she became assured that she was to be his mother:

He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.¹⁰

Other beatitudes and subsequent passages in the Sermon on the Mount will show how this sorrow that the poor feel should be expressed.

The meek

To be meek is to be self-effacing. Here again the perspective of the poor and powerful differs. This is not to deny that there is self promotion among the poor. The sin of self aggrandisement is universal. Neither can we deny the reality of self loathing among the rich and powerful. The full psychiatric clinics of the West witness to the contrary.

But there is a very real sense in which many of the poor do not have to become invisible because they already are. This is probably true particularly of a great many [poor] women in the world. For such people to be meek is to come to the conviction that they matter to God even if they are treated as non-entities by their husbands and their male-dominated society. They look to God to lift them up and trust in his willingness and ability to do so.

Though coming from a very different starting point the privileged and powerful likewise become meek when they depend on God to make a difference. Moses even though he had spent 40 years in exile before God called him to his great task had a very privileged upbringing. His education and grooming for the exercise of power contributed to making him one of the greatest leaders in history. Yet he is described as the meekest man on earth.¹¹

Meekness is the opposite of self-assertion but does not preclude strong assertion of the truth and justice of God. Moses was very strong on what God wanted. His will was subjected to God's will. He was also an unwilling leader. He did not push himself forward but almost had to be forced into prominence by God. For those that are privileged and that have access to

⁹ *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Leicester: IVP, 1992, p. 97. Cf. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978, p. 41: 'It is not the sorrow of bereavement to which Christ refers, but the sorrow of repentance.'

¹⁰ These verses are full of OT allusions, e.g. 1 Sam 2:5-8; Job 5:11; 12:18ff; Ps 34:17-18; 73; 107:9; 113:7-8; 146:6-9; Jer 5:26ff; 17:11; 31:10.

¹¹ Num 12:3 - 'humble' is used in the NIV.

power this is one of the most important lessons to learn when engaging in a struggle to overcome poverty. The crucial factor is not gaining control of power but dependency on God. Those who seek power in order to help the poor end up being corrupted by any power they may acquire.

Those who seek to bless the poor in dependence on the power of God really succeed. This is not an excuse for refusing to confront injustice but a challenge to do so in God's strength as the only way to make a significant difference. "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord.¹²

Poverty of spirit, mourning and meekness describe the humble person. Poverty of spirit drives us to God, mourning drives us to God with the evils of the world, meekness is the attitude which makes it possible to do something about it in God's strength.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

Righteousness (*dikaïosunē*) is a key concept in the Sermon on the Mount and is closely linked with the concept of the kingdom.¹³ It is a term that encompasses the whole process of establishing the kingdom of Jesus the Messiah. This wider purpose is also confirmed in Greek by the fact that there is only one term for the English "righteousness" and "justice".

There is certainly nothing in the context of Matthew 5:6 to suggest that righteousness in the sense of the imputed righteousness of Jesus is the exclusive meaning of *dikaïosunē* here. In fact those commentators who believe that the reference to the poor in vs. 3 should be taken literally argue that it must mean "justice" in this instance.

The truth is probably more subtle and reflects the Hebrew roots of the New Testament. Hebrew does distinguish between being just/righteous (*sedeqa*) and executing justice/righteousness (*mishpat*) although the two terms are treated as synonyms in Hebrew parallelisms.¹⁴

What this suggests is that it is possible to conceptually distinguish between being righteous and doing justice, but that the two concepts are essentially inseparable so that it is impossible to be righteous without doing justice and vice versa.

So, to hunger and thirst for righteousness is to long for the comprehensive blessing that the kingdom of God will bring. It is to long for people to be made righteous through the blood of Christ and that justice will be done for the poor. One cannot be more important than the other because they are both kingdom priorities because the kingdom means the reign of righteousness/justice.

The new heaven and earth is "the home of righteousness/justice" and it is ridiculous even to suggest that those that have been transplanted into it from the kingdom of darkness through the sacrifice of Christ should act other than justly as they wait its consummation.¹⁵ We love justice now because we will love it for ever.

¹² Zech 6:4

¹³ See Mt 5:10, 20; 6:33. We have also seen that it is central to the concept of the rule of God in the Old Testament.

¹⁴ Ps 36:6; 72:1-4.

¹⁵ 2 Pet 3:13.

The merciful

There is a clear echo of the Septuagint of Proverbs 14:21 here that reads: “blessed is the one who has mercy on the poor”. In Jewish society, by the time of Jesus, giving to the poor had become the most exalted way of showing mercy.

This can be seen in Matthew 6:2 where the words that are translated “give to the needy” originally meant “to do an act of mercy” but had “by the inter-testamental period... become a technical expression for almsgiving.”¹⁶ There is no need to limit showing mercy to showing mercy to the poor but it is good to remember that poverty provides the best context for sharing - for being merciful.

The pure in heart

The heart in the Bible is not the seat of the emotions but the centre of what we are as human beings. It controls the way we think and the way we act as well as the way we feel. Poverty of spirit creates the possibility of cleansing at the centre of our personality because it recognises that there is much cleansing to do within.

Jesus came to call those who knew that they were sinners so that the recognition of the need for inward cleansing became an absolute prerequisite for benefiting from his grace. Faith in Jesus’ offer of forgiveness cleanses the heart and creates the possibility that good things will flow from within. Here again we are dealing with the very essence of the new covenant. If there is purity in the heart then God is at the centre and his life can flow out to others.

We cannot be blessed or a blessing unless we give attention to our heart relationship to God. This does not mean immediate perfection but it does mean that we can be channels of God’s blessing to others and that we can begin to be single-minded in our pursuit of God and the good of our neighbours. If we do this we are assured that we will see God not in a way that will prove fatal but as the ultimate experience of bliss.

The peacemakers

Peace is a very comprehensive concept in the Old Testament. It is the opposite of everything that the world has become as a result of sin. By the time of the Flood the world was full of violence and, sadly, that is still a valid description of the world today.

It takes very little imagination to picture the impact of such senseless violence on the quality of people’s lives. As a conflict within a state the civil war in the DRC, which is estimated to have claimed more than 3 million lives, is now typical of most conflicts in the world.

At the beginning of 2006 the United Nations High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR] estimated that such conflict had caused the internal displacement of 23.7 million people in 52 countries.

The combined suffering of people fleeing their homes in terror while everything they had was looted and destroyed is unimaginable, but this is the reality of conflict and violence. Peace in the sense of the cessation of conflict would be a precious gift in these situations.

But peace in the Old Testament is not simply a lack of violence, conflict and war. It is what happens when people live their life in the way that God had always intended that they should. Fundamental to this is restoration of our broken relationship with our creator. This is

¹⁶ Hagner, Donald A., *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 33a: Matthew 1-13*, (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher) 1998.

pictured prophetically in Isaiah who sees the beautiful feet of the herald coming over the mountains to proclaim peace because the Lord has redeemed his people.¹⁷

John the Baptist proclaimed the dramatic return of the Lord himself to his people so that he could reveal his glory to all mankind because the sin of his people had been paid for.¹⁸ This is the kingdom that has come, is coming and will come in Jesus the Messiah bringing glory to God and peace on earth.¹⁹ Real peace is peace with God, peace between people and peace with the rest of creation.²⁰

The world in which we live is full of conflict that is the cause of an immense amount of poverty. Nations, tribes and families fight each other. Quarrels abound in every community. In the midst of this, the followers of Jesus are called to be actively making peace between people as well as between people and God through the good news of the gospel.

Peace and poverty cannot coexist. We are to actively and deliberately bring conflict to an end by reconciling enemies and in the process create one of the essential conditions for people to flourish in every sense.²¹ It is peacemakers in this comprehensive sense that are known as the children of God.

Those persecuted because of righteousness

This Beatitude is somewhat unexpected. From the human perspective kingdom people do not seem to be people that the powerful of this world need to fear.

Paul reminds the congregation of Christians in Corinth that “not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth”²² and this could probably be said about most Christian congregations since.

Yet the history of the church is drenched in the blood of martyrs and there were more Christian martyrs in the 20th century than the previous 19 centuries added together.

So, what is it that the powers that be find so threatening about Christians? Very simply it is kingdom people’s concern for righteousness/justice that Jesus says is synonymous with their love for him. “Blessed are you,” he says, “when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”²³

The powers of this world will find us threatening in the same way as they found Jesus threatening. The teachers of the law and Pharisees were threatened by Jesus because he challenged their preoccupation with their own goodness that led to a lack of compassion for ordinary people struggling in their sins, sorrows and sufferings.

The high priest’s family that controlled the lucrative temple cult in Jerusalem were threatened by his reminder that the cult was not meant to benefit them personally but the ordinary people and even gentiles.

¹⁷ Is 52:7-10.

¹⁸ Is 40:1-5.

¹⁹ Lk 2:14.

²⁰ See Is 65:17ff for a wonderful poetic picture of this peace in the new heavens and earth that God promises to create for his people.

²¹ Cf. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, op. cit. page 101: ‘There is a quality of peaceableness, a disinclination to engage in disputes, that is admirable, but Jesus is talking about more than that. He refers not to peace-keepers but to peace-makers, people who end hostilities and bring the quarrelsome together.’

²² 1 Cor 1:26

²³ Mt 5:11.

Herod was threatened because he felt that Jesus, like John the Baptist, would condemn his immoral lifestyle. Pilate, the colonial governor, was persuaded to believe that Jesus was a threat to the power of the divine Caesar in Palestine.

In other words, the righteousness/justice that Jesus embodied was a threat to the religious, economic, moral and governing powers of his world! They thought that they had put an end to the threat when they nailed him to the cross, but he rose from the grave and his threatening Spirit lives on in the hearts and lives of his kingdom people.

Every thing that we are and do should speak of his peaceable kingdom that by its nature undermines injustice and oppression in the world. But we should expect to be persecuted and rejoice when it happens because our reward in heaven will be great.²⁴

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²⁴ Mt 5:12

Flourishing in a Resource Constrained World

God's hidden blueprint for his planet

Author: Peter Price-Thomas, Ecochurch

How can we possibly flourish in a resource constrained world? Just surviving seems a hard enough proposition given the challenges that face us. Businesses are being encouraged to design with sustainability in mind.

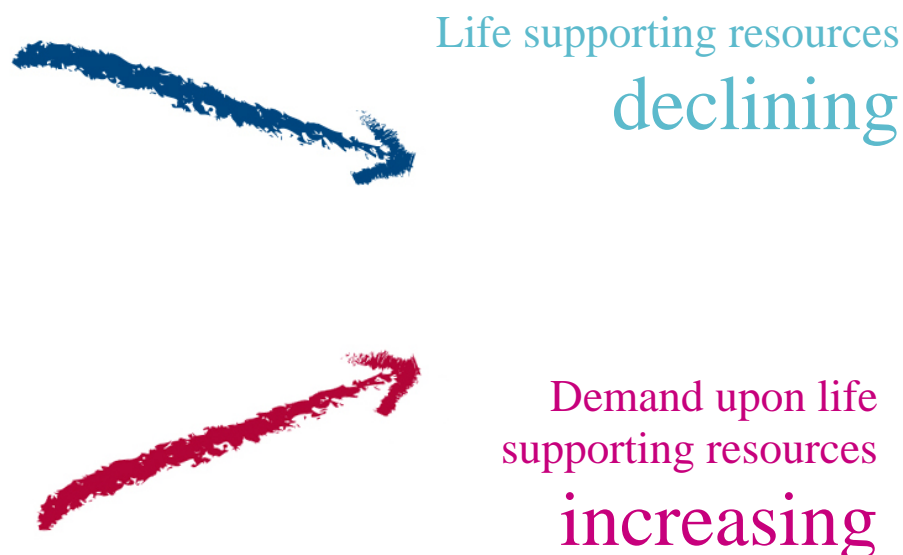
However, with the current externalities that exist within the economic system it will only get us so far. As for governments, would they ever bring in laws that reduced our standard of living? Indeed, would we ever vote for a politician who promised to? We all know that we need to act more responsibly and yet, for most of us, we do little more than tinker with our lifestyles.

If we are to create the change that is needed, it will have to be because at a deeper level we believe in it. Put another way, unless God is involved we will not see the restoration of creation that He yearns for. Christians therefore have a key role to play in helping to create a more sustainable world.

Resource constraints

People talk about an increasingly resource constrained world, but what do we really mean by that?

A simple way to describe it is that life supporting resources, such as clean air, clean water and topsoil are in decline at the same time as our demand upon those resources is systematically increasing as a function of population and consumption. You don't have to be a prize-winning economist to see where these trends will lead us.



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Over the next 50 years global population is projected to rise 1.5 fold. Consumption is projected to increase by 4-6 fold per capita. Therefore, just to stay at the same rate of degradation as currently we must become 6-9 times more efficient in how we provide service. Given this, how do we possibly start addressing the sustainability challenges that face us?

Moving upstream

Imagine that you have left a bath running and unbeknownst to you the overflow is blocked and the water is running out of the bath, onto the floor and into the hall way. What is the most strategic way to deal with this? Do you commission a study to look at the rate at which the water flows onto the carpet and if it isn't getting worse think, "that's OK"? Or do you sandbag up the doorway to stop the water getting out of the bathroom? Or lay towels across the bathroom floor to stop the rate of flow? Or build up the sides of the bath? Or pull the plug out? Or turn the taps off?

It seems pretty obvious that you would turn the taps off. Yet with many social and environmental issues we tend to try to tackle the issues downstream, for example trying to assess whether the rate at which pollution is being released into nature is acceptable or not; or focusing our efforts solely on building flood defences rather than addressing the causes of the flooding in the first place.

As mentioned in the previous section, two of the major drivers behind the current global challenge of sustainability are population and consumption. Most of the social or environmental issues that we face from deforestation to droughts can, mostly, be traced back to one of these two issues. So if we are able to tackle consumption and population, we are able to tackle a variety of different downstream challenges by tackling their upstream causes. This is much more strategic in the long run.

As Christians, we are able to go even further upstream by seeking to address the fundamental issues underpinning population and consumption - why do people consume? Why do people have large families? As Christians, we can have a very different conversation about this than we could in a secular context (The next section addresses consumption but the same questions can also be asked of population).

If you ask yourself 'why do I consume?' for most of us, it becomes readily apparent that it is not just to meet our basic needs. Indeed, if we are really honest with ourselves things that we wish were not there might start to come up, such as desire, temptation, fear and 'keeping up with the Jones's. But even when we are aware of some of these drivers, it is very difficult, even with the best will in the world, to do something about it on our own.

To really tackle the issues of sustainability upstream therefore, we must ask God into our hearts to help address these issues. If we get right with him, and cut off the causes that are not of him, it is likely that we will consume far less.

A simple guideline that may help is the next time that you are going to buy something that is non-essential just pause for a moment and pray about it. Do you really need it? If you have a peace, buy it. If you don't, maybe leave it. The challenge is not to fall into the trap of living in a poverty spirit, but rather to live in a responsible spirit.

It is not all sack cloth and ashes

So then, is a frugal lifestyle with small families what we are being called to if we are to overcome the sustainability challenges facing us? Thankfully, there is another aspect to this

equation, one that is not subject to resource constraints - our God given creativity and ingenuity. After all, there is nothing wrong with consuming things *per se*.

Rather, it only becomes a sustainability problem due to the manner in which we currently provide for our needs. For example, in the US approximately 99% of the materials contained in the creation or manufacture of a product become waste within 6 weeks of sale (Factor 10, www.factor10-institute.org).

But using our creativity it doesn't have to be this way. Given the resource constraints that we are faced with could we provide for people's needs in a manner that is far more efficient? Could we provide for people's needs at a global scale in a way that enhances creation rather than degrades it? This may seem like a pipe dream, but it isn't. Not only has God created such a system, he has also provided us with the blueprints for it if we care to look. The system in question is His creation.

Creation – God's hidden blueprint?

Where do you feel most alive? Where do you feel closest to God? Many people, Christians and non-Christians alike will say that it is when they are out in God's creation – be it on a mountain top, looking at a sunset or watching the waves crash in on a beach. And yet equally, where do we spend most of our time? Often far from it, be it an office, or a shop, or just in a congested town or city.

At the fall - the lie was sown that we are separate to nature, that we are 'other'. It changed our relationship with nature and it is interesting to see how our relationship with nature has changed over time.

Initially nature was seen as a threat, something to be tamed and subdued. Then it became a resource to provide us with raw materials to make our lives more comfortable.

In time we came to realise that it provided us with critical life supporting services such as regulating the climate, providing us with clean air and water. We came to value it as a place to go to become inspired, and maybe to draw closer to God. And now, I am suggesting that nature can also be treated as a blueprint to help us tackle the challenges that we face as a society.

Did nature really fall at the fall, or just our relationship with it? 'All of creation groans', but is that because of what we started to do to it? It is an interesting reflection that many of the environmental challenges that we currently face start with us, as humans.

Nature doesn't appear to suffer from many of the problems that affect society. In nature there is no such thing as waste, compared to our systems where 99% of materials end up in that form.

Or consider the efficiency of capturing energy from the sun, comparing that of a leaf photosynthesizing sunlight to the most modern photovoltaic cell. The differences in efficiency are many orders of magnitude, even excluding the energy/materials used to create them in the first place. Or the efficiency of water purification by a wetland in contrast to our massively resource intensive systems, let alone which system is more aesthetically pleasing.

Even in terms of how society could operate, nature provides us with examples. In terms of teamwork and self discipline, look at ants. As it says in Proverbs "Go to the ant you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food for the harvest" (Proverbs 6:6-8).

Consider the elegance and efficiency of an Arctic Tern, that annually flies from the Arctic to the Antarctic and back again powered by renewable resources and creating only biodegradable waste.

God created an extraordinary system and He directs us to it. It contains incredible design that bears His fingerprints and provides us with a blueprint for flourishing in a resource constrained world.

How?

You may rightly ask, but how do we use these blueprints? This will depend upon what it is that you are trying to do and whether you are acting as an individual or as an organization.

As an organization trying to deliver a product or service in a more sustainable manner, firstly ask the question of “what is the service that we are trying to provide?” Then get out into nature and see how God did it first.

Look to learn from what works in nature and apply it. And at the very least, design your product or service in line with nature – i.e. made from renewable resources, very efficient, recyclable or reusable and in a form that it never ends up as waste.

An example of this is the utility company in the US, who used to have to flush their pipes with a corrosive chemical to stop significant limescale build-up. They were encouraged to see whether nature could provide them with a better way of doing this.

Their solution was based on an enzyme that stopped a mussel shell growing too large. By coating their pipes with this enzyme once, they no longer needed to use corrosive chemical flushing (see Biomimicry by Janine Benyus for more examples like this).

If you are an individual, then the best thing that you can do is to support companies that provide products and services that use God’s blueprint as their design template and at the same time are socially responsible. If you are unsure, then ask a question. Your money and your questions are two of the most powerful ways to influence change.

Ten people asked the same question about CFCs in the Swedish supermarket chain ICA in a week. Ultimately this led to Electrolux, the largest global white goods manufacturer, developing a far less damaging form of refrigeration. Never therefore buy into the lie that what you say or do doesn’t make a difference – you are far more powerful than you realise.

Using God’s blueprint also helps avoid the law of unintended consequences, because everything has already been tried and tested within Creation. God has provided us with His blueprint. The enemy has tried to separate us from and indeed destroy it, but now God is encouraging us not only to use and be inspired by Creation, but to learn from it too.

Restoration

God yearns to see His creation fully restored through the redemptive power of Jesus. We can and should be part of that restoration, not least as that restoration can’t happen without Him. By involving God in the process, focusing upstream and using the blueprint that He has provided we can not only thrive, but truly flourish in a resource constrained world.

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God's Indelible Imprint

Thumbs up for global change!



Author: Andy Kingston-Smith, Assistant Lecturer in Mission Studies, Redcliffe College

The theme “just living” provokes a number of possible interpretations; some relate to our physical context, some to the “times we live in”, still others to our status in life.

When considering contemporary times, the pursuit of justice-based living has been brought into sharp focus by the current banking crisis resulting from the credit crunch. If we ever thought that high-flying bankers lived in ivory towers, inaccessible and remote, then the banking crisis dispels the myth that they are detached and we are unaffected. We are now feeling the full force of maverick greed-inducing pragmatism, laced with an intoxicating mixture of dangerous “hedging” and “betting”. The pawns are us, ordinary men and women affected by their decisions to greater or lesser extents.

This short article is not intended to provide a rigorous academic critique (that I leave to our other contributors), but to challenge and provoke us to consider God's fingerprints on this planet, so evident around us, but suffering from the smudges and stains of our crass arrogance. To that end I offer my disclaimer that this article *might* jeopardise the stability of our comfort zones!

Environmental issues, of course, are inextricably linked to this backdrop of economic fall-out. At the recent John Ray Initiative (JRI)¹/Redcliffe College Environment Conference² in January, Dr Andrew Steer³ portrayed a hope-fuelled scenario. He reminded us that we have much to be thankful for... millions raised out of poverty, huge progress achieved in tackling illiteracy, not to mention the empowering of women into affirming and meaningful employment, and improved welfare for their children.

There *are* signs of encouraging progress which we do well to look for in these times. However, for every piece of positive news there is, the daily BBC round-up unerringly, and without fail, reminds us of the bad news.

I was struck when listening to Dr Martin Hodson⁴ at the “Hope for Planet Earth” seminar in Cheltenham in early March, that the rate of ice melt in the Arctic region continues unabated; most disturbingly the acceleration seems to have taken the experts by surprise too.⁵

As I compile these thoughts, I am gazing out of the window of the train on my way up to Manchester to visit some Peruvian missionaries. The sun is shining and the world seems to be a good place; the landscape is greening in the first flushes of spring, sheep are grazing with little apparent concern or anxiety, and humanity is busily and purposefully going about its daily business. It reminds me of the old British Rail advert smooching along to Louis Armstrong's “what a wonderful world” serenade.

¹ For further information about JRI's work, see <http://www.jri.org.uk>

² Further information about the Environment Conference may be found on Redcliffe's website; see <http://www.redcliffe.org/standard.asp?id=5560&cachefixer=cf75734878187161>

³ Dr Andrew Steer is Director General of Policy and Research at the UK Department for International Development (DFID) (<http://www.dfid.gov.uk>)

⁴ Dr Martin Hodson is an environmental biologist at Oxford Brookes University and an active member of Sage, Oxford's Christian environmental group (<http://www.sageoxford.org.uk>)

⁵ I refer to Dr Martin Hodson's comments concerning Sir John Houghton's revised estimate that the summer ice could disappear entirely from the Arctic region by the 2020s and not the 2080s as he had opined just a year earlier. See the following BBC articles for further information:- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7139797.stm> dated 12th December 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7692963.stm> dated 28th October 2008

I feel the need to jolt myself back into reality lest I am sucked into that same unreality that pervades the mindset of the bankers gambling with our lives, dumping huge multi-billion corporations, discarded (now that they no longer respond to their games) into the hands of a Government “entrusted” with picking up the shattered pieces. The ex-bankers presumably have now moved on to indulge in “planning” how they can possibly spend their £16 million pension funds.⁶ They are “just living”, just living to enjoy themselves at the expense of the many. As I listen to public sentiment it is no wonder we hear people cry, “it’s not fair.”

On the *Greening of Mission* module currently being delivered to the MA students at Redcliffe, we were reminded just last week that when planet earth was first viewed from space in the late 1960s, political divisions, warfare, suffering and death could not be seen.⁷

Any alien approaching the planet from 200,000 miles away would be forgiven for thinking that the serenity of this blue sphere hanging in space would make an ideal holiday destination for stressed-out extraterrestrials. It promises lazy beaches filled with palm trees swaying in the gentle breeze. No signs of the pain of displacement of the millions of political and environmental refugees, homes destroyed through political, ideological or religious bickering or hospitals and morgues filled with the victims of war are evident from that distance. Some of these victims are only “just living”, if we can call their existence “living” in any true sense of the word.

So what’s going on? Let’s zoom back in to earth for a moment. Dr Andrew Steer left us with the challenge that “green/clean” technology allied to political will could yet be the saviour of the planet. Investment on a massive scale is still required and to that extent the implications of the recession were depicted as being a negative spanner in the well-oiled works of Government.

Will Alistair yet become the “darling” of the people, and find an enlightened path through the gloom? Yes, we should praise God for the many wonderful things His “very good creation” has achieved, yet the cynics amongst us are left wondering whether the “progress” so championed by, for example, the Victorian Empire, needs a serious reality check in the early years of the 21st Century.

Can progress really carry on, seemingly unchecked and without limit? Will this current crisis lead to significant and lasting reform, spawning a more humane and socially-responsible form of capitalism?⁸ That would be my sincere hope.

But so long as economic profit remains the “bottom line”,⁹ our hopes for a “global development project”, which is genuinely kind to the environment and to the majority of the non-western world (which probably doesn’t think the world is so “green and pleasant”) may remain just “pie in the sky”. Never mind the fact that most non-westerners do not have the means, or the inclination,¹⁰ to admire the green *vista* from the train (that great testament to Victorian progress) as the verdant hills and rolling plains flash past. What kind of

⁶ With reference to The Royal Bank of Scotland’s ex-chief executive, Sir Fred Goodwin, as reported in the recent BBC article dated 3rd March 2009, (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7921778.stm>)

⁷ With reference to Sachs, W., *Planet Dialectics: Explorations in Environment and Development*, London: Zed Books Ltd., 1999, pp.129-131, 149-155

⁸ A number of experts are exploring new forms of capitalism. The classical capitalist model’s vulnerability to economic excesses has been significantly discredited in recent years, not least in the context of the present-day credit crunch. See for example the concept of ‘natural capitalism’ by Amory Lovins, where human and natural values are properly considered within the context of business strategy, (<http://www.globalissues.org/video/732/amory-lovins-natural-capitalism#Summary>)

⁹ A company only exists legally if it has been formed for the principal purpose of making profit. We know that profit is not inherently bad (assuming it has been gained fairly, and is then utilised in a proper manner). The trouble comes when reality so often evidences the opposite, so maybe a fundamental rethink in this area is needed...and urgently!

¹⁰ They are too busy trying to survive today to worry about tomorrow

development do we need to consider now, when the numbers of abjectly poor continue to rise and when inequality appears to be growing on an exponential scale?¹¹ How can we possibly pat our backs, in such circumstances, and claim that our work has been “good”?

If you think I am being harsh, maybe I am, but then again, I don't think we have long to pontificate, smile sweetly and imagine what we will do with our future retirements. Dr Martin Hodson, in the talk mentioned above, graphically sketched out the statistical data which suggests that current levels of carbon emissions are rapidly approaching dangerous and unprecedented levels. We have seven years in which to reverse this trend and if we do not see a significant reversal immediately after 2016 then we are in big trouble.

The world beyond the West is suffering in large part the excesses of our wasteful and luxurious lives... we all need to hold up our hands and admit that we are implicated in this gross injustice. Nehemiah's prayer on behalf of his people comes to mind.¹² He pleaded with God for the forgiveness of his sins and those of his fathers. Dare we hope that our children and grandchildren will take similar action to exonerate us, after the legacy we are likely to leave them? Do our hands bear the evidence of the black ink that our own fingerprints have uniquely left for posterity in the criminal records of the cosmic database?

You see, we are often “just living” without due care and attention for others. We have not signed-up for justice-living, which *really* costs us. So what do we do about it? Leaving aside the obvious spiritual engagement, may I firstly suggest, education; secondly, compassion.¹³ Let's take the first one initially, and to that end I refer you to Dr Dewi Hughes'¹⁴ two articles above.

Dewi reminded us that God's blueprint for equitable and fair “human to human” and apposite “human to God” relations are illustrated in the Jubilee principles laid out in Leviticus 25, and elsewhere in Scripture.¹⁵ Whether or not this ethical “code” was ever implemented has more to say about human beings and our tendency to wander into “blind-alleyways” and protect the *status quo* when it suits us, rather than cast any doubt on God's original and faultless designs.

Now the challenge is to consider to what extent these principles can be copied and pasted into contemporary living. Jesus encouraged a “third way approach” to healthy living, for those hungry enough to listen on the mountainside then,¹⁶ as much as to those of us today.

The early church seemed to have grasped the spirit of this message too, even if we tend to apply rose-tinted spectacles to the Acts passages¹⁷ and gloss over the real tensions that these issues surely created for many early Christians. However, God's blueprint is unequivocal, and therein lays the clue if we have the “eyes to see and the ears to listen”.

I appreciated Peter Price-Thomas'¹⁸ practical description of God's handiwork evident in His creation, if we are prepared, that is, for God's revelation to remove the scales from our eyes so often obliterating the view.

¹¹ Nearly a billion of the world's population lives on less than a dollar a day (see <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>). See also Tearfund's website, <http://www.tearfund.org> and the Worldmapper chart at <http://www.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=179> for a graphic portrayal of global poverty. It's not too late to join the carbon fast!

¹² Nehemiah 1:4-10

¹³ This word does not mean “feeling sorry,” but being “moved to act”. Jesus is our greatest model for observing this type of response

¹⁴ Dr Dewi Hughes is Tearfund's Theological Advisor

¹⁵ For example, the stern rebuke in Isaiah 58 and throughout the book of Amos

¹⁶ See the Beatitudes in Matthew, chapter 5

¹⁷ Acts 2:42-47, Acts 4:32-37. See the story of Ananias and Sapphira in the following chapter 5 of Acts

¹⁸ Peter Price-Thomas is the founder of Eco-church (<http://www.ecochurch.org.uk>), which seeks to help Christians see sustainable development as an extension of their faith. Formerly he was with The Natural Step

Dealing with the causes, not the effects, must always be wise advice when considering our priorities for long-term change; “*upstream*”, rather than “downstream” is clearly the operative word. It takes courage and vision to see where we are heading, and like Noah, Moses, Abraham, etc. the outworking of our faith, amidst the ridicule heaped on those obedient to God’s voice, has been, and always will be, the challenge that sets apart Christ’s true church.

Seeing the wonder of the spider’s web captured so simply and profoundly in a children’s story¹⁹ prompts us that like children we must become if we are to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. This is not to debate the meaning behind Jesus’ rebuke to the disciples,²⁰ but to remember that the “yes” to faith by a child must not be underestimated or squashed by the “wisdom” of elder years. Of course, age brings maturity and experience, but it does depend what we have been feeding ourselves on during the intervening years.

To my own shame, not so very long ago, I approached many environmental issues with some degree of disdain and suspicion. Whilst not exactly a die-hard materialistic consumer, I bought into the lie that progress meant using up more and more “green and pleasant land” for the “greater good” of building more and more “concrete jungles”, namely, the “impressive urbanisation project”.

My problem was that I had acquired, and regularly fed, an anthropocentric world-view. The image of the “eco-warriors” campaigning against nuclear disarmament at Mildenhall in the 1980s was not an enticing one for me during impressionable years. Yet, as every child soon discovers, every action has a consequence, I have also learnt that every act of consumption has an environmental consequence. “Carbon footprint” accountability so regularly reminds us that much of this consumption has negative consequences... we have unlearned how to live lightly, thinking we were learning to live better.

Time is almost up. No longer should we think, “which is the quickest and cheapest (cheapest to whom; us or nature?) way of getting from A to B?” Tearfund’s speaker so rightly reminded the audience in Cheltenham that we should think twice about that flight to Spain to top-up the tan; is there a *better* (in every sense of the word) way of travelling to Krakow or Warsaw (or wherever it was that Tearfund were meeting), than to opt for the ease and convenience of flying? They deemed yes; it was longer time-wise, and more expensive economically to take the train; but that meant more time to spend together in fellowship and presumably a little less money to be tempted by unnecessary gadgets.²¹

On re-reading the above, I sound like a real kill-joy! Well, I recognise that owning a car and a house (or at least part-owning with the building society, or is it now the Government (?)) puts me in a position of great global privilege; I know that full well, and maybe I should be a bit more of a kill-joy (at least towards myself), if it means I can better see the backdrop of poverty and environmental degradation that exists “out there”, and which highlights, rather uncomfortably, our differences! My time working in mission in Bolivia will leave many images seared on my conscience, which I hope God will never remove, for my own sake more than any other. Like the Old Testament prophets, when we encounter injustice we should be angry. I’ve come to the conclusion that apathy is obviously the *real* kill-joy!

I hope that the articles by Dr Dewi Hughes and Peter Price-Thomas not only challenge your thinking but prompt you into appropriate and considered action. My desire with every student

(<http://www.naturalstep.org>) and Forum For the Future (<http://www.forumforthefuture.org>), both leading sustainable development charities

¹⁹ If you haven’t seen the film, *Charlotte’s Web*, ditch the adult pride and let its wonder speak to you!

²⁰ Matthew 18:3

²¹ At the seminar in Cheltenham, Andy Frost, Director of Sharing Jesus International

(<http://www.sharejesusinternational.com>) explained the challenge of persuading young people that the environmental costs of upgrading mobile phones should outweigh the gains of ‘keeping up with the Jones’

who completes the Greening of Mission module here at Redcliffe is that they go back to their place of service, whether in the UK or elsewhere, just that little bit more enlightened.

Reminded of God's "good" creation, the reality of the mess we have made, and the responsibility originally entrusted to Adam to tend the earth and take care of it, some of these students may become powerful advocates for positive change in their contexts. This labour of love has never gone away and faces us more acutely than ever before. Many of the poor are victims of environmental catastrophe, or unfair trade practices or the arbitrariness of being born in a certain place at a certain time. If we believe in a God of justice, then, as His ambassadors, we had better get on with cleaning up our act, and fast!

Please join with me in praying that at Redcliffe we would re-discover God's "*greenprint*" for us as a College, such that we give credence and authenticity to the message we "preach" and that we grow in our conviction, understanding and influence as we steward the awesome responsibility of every human heart and mind that passes through our corridors each year.

Some doubters might think that green issues are irrelevant, or wacky or of little importance, but I grow daily in my conviction that God's justice is not for humanity only²² but for all of His creation. That is a sobering thought when annually hundreds of species are becoming extinct, at a pace of up to one thousand times the historical background rate.²³ And what's more, even if it were "just living" just for humans, research is increasingly uncovering the alarming impact of environmental degradation on us; poverty and sickness issues just cannot be divorced from environmental concerns, for the two exist in tandem.

Our pride might yet lead us to the scenario where we have extinguished ourselves through war or famine, and the aliens arriving for their winter holidays find a landscape barren and absent of humanity; maybe not unlike our own Martian findings. I don't think that's the scenario we would want to imagine, is it?

Have we been moved yet? Let's pause for a compassion-check.

I trust the above has provoked something within you. Our privilege is to engage with you through mutually stimulating and challenging thinking; for the sake of the lost, and the planet we love.

Please Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.

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²² See, for example, Romans 8:18-25

²³ See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/earth-faces-catastrophic-loss-of-species-408605.html>

'L' is for Lifestyle: Christian living that doesn't cost the earth

by Ruth Valerio



Review by Tim Davy, Reviews editor for Encounters and Assistant Lecturer in Biblical Studies, Redcliffe College.

This book is an accessible, informative and practical guide to living as Christians in a world characterised by injustice and finite resources.

Much has changed in the world between the original publication of *'L' is for Lifestyle* and this, the revised edition. It is hard to believe, but, states Valerio in her new introduction, when she first wrote the book (2004), fair trade products were not available in British supermarkets, and 'climate change' as a term needed to be explained. Much has also changed in terms of globalisation and the increasing and extraordinary growth, and consequent resource demands, of nations such as China, India, and Brazil. An updated edition was therefore necessary.

The format of the book is simple. After a brief introduction the main body of the book comprises a chapter of no more than a few pages for each letter of the alphabet (Activists, Bananas, Creation, Driving, Energy, Food, Globalization, HIV, Investments, Jobs, Kippers, Letters, Money, Needs, Organic, Paper, Questions, Recycling, Simplicity, Tourism, Unwanted Peoples, Volunteers, Water, Xenophobia, Young People, and Zeitgeist).

This particular format makes the book very accessible as it allows the reader to dip in without getting overwhelmed by information and calls to action. Valerio's philosophy is that, while we need to do more than just tinker at the edges of our lifestyles, we need to isolate manageable changes that we can actually achieve. When we have made one change, we can then move on to the next.

Throughout the book, Valerio balances insightful descriptions of the issues with clear and practical action points. She regularly frames the discussions within accessible theological frameworks that helpfully bring out the biblical material in relation to issues of poverty, justice and creation care.

As I read *'L' is for Lifestyle*, I kept thinking about how the world has changed even in the last few months. What do these issues mean in a context of global economic duress? Will an economic downturn help or hinder the progress of concern for creation and poverty? How, for example, does the current context affect statements such as:

"One of the greatest ironies of time is that time often seems to be directly disproportional to the amount of money we have. Time is one of the greatest dividers: between those who spend time to save money and those who spend money to save time." (pp.135-136, S is for Simplicity)

I am not wholly convinced by this. Although it may be true in a general sense, it does not seem to account for the many people who, relative to their context, have neither time nor money.

In summary, though, *'L' is for Lifestyle* is an absorbing and accessible read, full of insight, wisdom, passion and biblical sense. As the author herself would acknowledge, the reader may not want or be able to put into practice all that she suggests. Nevertheless, we can do many things to make our lifestyles more in line with how God would have us live.

This is an excellent introduction to a range of important issues, full of 'wise passion', and brimming with suggestions for further information and action.

Buy '*L' is for Lifestyle* from [St Andrew's Bookshop](#).

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