

Madurai 2008 Urban Seminar

First I wish to thank our bishops for their warm welcome and pay tribute to those who have been responsible for the organisation here in Madurai of this seminar, and especially to my dear friend and former colleague the Revd Jeyachandran Paulraj, who worked with me for some time in England.

I have been asked to set the global scene for our seminar and for the sharing of our papers here in India and in order to do so I have been given the theme: “Being Urban. Being Global”

We are all getting to know the facts. There is at present a rampant increase in urban populations across the globe. The equivalent of the whole population of a country like Kenya or Spain is moving from countryside to town or city every year! In Korea, within 40 years, the population has turned from 80% rural to 80% urban. We observe the rise of mega-sized cities in Latin America and Asia and already these poor cities are proving that they cannot take the expansion. The process issues in poverty and disease – ‘urban famine’ is becoming a real threat, and children and women, as ever was, bear the worst burden. Indeed it is a credit to human ingenuity that some cities, in the face of such overwhelming odds, function at all.

And all this urbanisation and the escalating flow of people to the cities seems intricately related to the new globalisation. It is as if globalisation *needs* these cities in order for it to function effectively. Writing elsewhere [*Urban Ministry and the Kingdom of God p53*] I have likened the cities to the ‘hardware’ that allows the processes, or ‘software’, of globalisation to operate. And the urban ‘hardware’ has in turn increasingly to conform to the requirements of the software (the processes of globalisation) so that as we journey from city to city we see an homogenisation – a relentless sameness setting in. This has been labelled the ‘MacDonaldisation’ of the globe, as American super-chains and companies stamp their brand and mall culture on every city.

And what does it all do to human beings? As people swarm from countryside to city and from city to city, across countries and across the world, our roots become severed

and our identities become muddled. The diverse mix of cultures – those symbols which help us to make sense of the complexities of life – now defy comprehension, and so we lose our bearings, our sense of place, and our sense of home. In the globalising cities refugees are excluded and the rich barricade themselves behind their gates. No one seems to feel secure and at home as they once did and the urban communications media cry out about new levels of concern about stability, violence, unemployment, slum accommodation, poverty, questionable governance, and so on. And at this seminar, perhaps our biggest question of all - what is the Good News, the Gospel, in these new circumstances? What is it and how is it best shared? Can we recognise what God's Mission is to this situation and fall in behind it? How can we become part of the *Missio Dei* when we are having such trouble analysing the state of the mission field in which we are placed? So analysis is of crucial importance to us – that we seek to understand the nature of the powers that are shaping the globe and our cities in order to see within that clearer picture where God is at work and powers battle against the Divine purposes.

Since most of the papers offered at this seminar will be from the Indian perspective I feel it would be most helpful if I begin our thinking together by offering some insights and challenges from the European scene – and especially from London, the city I know best having been born and bred there. We will find that from the London perspective, things look rather different from the way they do here in India, and the two perspectives together will help us become three-dimensional.

London has recently been changing out of all recognition!

- It's old industrial centres have declined and all but disappeared because we have no substantial manufacturing industry left. This means that urban land can no longer be valued as a place to manufacture, but nevertheless it has become a means to create wealth by using for house building and commercial development. Cranes and building sites are everywhere.
- New thriving business districts are springing up – offices and shopping malls of abundant luxury which make Chennai's Spencer Plaza look poor in comparison. Similarly the disused docks are being turned into fashionable, expensive locales for luxury living.

- At the edges of London you will find an increasing suburban sprawl of housing. These dwellings are in no way slums by international standards but are of very high quality. However, purchasers become totally dependent on private transport since these suburbs are provided with no local amenities – houses by the thousand but not a shop for miles. This style of development means that no-where is within walking distance – every family needs at least one car for travel to work, shops, school, etc. We have become a commuting nation with millions clogging the roads morning and night, thus making our culture extremely vulnerable to oil availability.
- With the increase in commuting, work-related stress and fear of crime, quality of life for most urban dwellers seems to dwindle just when financial wealth is more abundant. London has become a grasping and greedy city of immense wealth and yet of gaping inequality.
- More than half the immigration to UK has squashed into London which has made it a city of extraordinary mixity.. Of London's population of 7.3 million, a third of that number was born outside the UK (most from India and second from Bangladesh).
- More recently have come new immigrant communities. In years past, immigrants tended to be black but English-speaking, now they are white but speaking Eastern European languages from Poland, Latvia, or Estonia.
- New cultural enclaves are overtaking the old ones – on some London streets you can count the different African national churches by the yard! Middle class whites have their enclaves too, with gentrification and gated communities infiltrating the wealthy into the inner city areas.

All this is changing the culture of the place and the self-understandings of what it is for a person to call themselves a 'Londoner'.

What has caused this shift? ¹

- In the 1960s manufacturing employment peaked in UK but thereafter saw sharp decline. Manufacturing was going where raw materials and labour costs were cheaper – the Southern hemisphere, India, China and elsewhere. What was UK to do? Two choices opened up for politicians – either to move towards socialism or towards neo-liberalism which was a rising to power in the USA. It was Margaret Thatcher, with Ronald Reagan in the USA and Helmut Kohl in Germany, who convinced their people to trust them to move their nations towards neo-liberalism by preaching that there was no alternative to the power and influence of the capitalist market place.
- The 1970s saw oil prices hit new highs. Dollars owned by non-Americans (known as Euro-dollars), together with petro-dollars, were looking for an established trading base. At the same time Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher wanted to deregulate the London Stock Exchange – and so it was that money was sucked into the new jet-setting, high tech, 24/7 world of the new neo-liberal London.

Thatcher arrived as Prime Minister of the UK in May 1979 and set about waging class war on behalf of the neo-liberals. She did this in a number of ways. First, she centralised control by defeating local town and city government by imposition of local rate-capping. Next the miners and press unions were scuppered. The GLC (Greater London Council), which had led the fight for an open socialism, was abolished. Finally, she invited Jewish Canadian money to bankroll the building of Canary Wharf as the new financial centre which has transformed the London skyline and shifted the balance of power eastward along the River Thames.

These extraordinary changes have led to the creation of a super-rich elite in London and in some of the daughter cities of the capital. As a result we have seen the devastating growth of inequality between people within the capital, between north and

¹ Much of the following description of London's transformation is culled from Doreen Massey's *World City* (Polity Press 2007) which is highly recommended reading.

south in UK, and in the world. London has become a honey-pot and tax haven within which the average annual earnings of Chief Executives in the City of London now stands at £2.5 million whilst average incomes countrywide stand at only £22 thousand. In the 20 years to 2000, London manufacturing fell by 63%, but financial dealings, where the real incomes are now to be had, grew by no less than 81%. Those with the skills to benefit escalated their earnings whilst the others went to the wall.

London has thereby reinvented itself as a global city of power, for while Jerusalem is a world city for religion, Sydney for lesbian/gay networks and Hollywood & Mumbai have become film capitals, London, Paris, Tokyo and NY are now command centres of world economy. You will find in London 30% of all global foreign exchange, 40% of the global foreign equity market, and 70% of all trade in Eurobonds. There are 250 foreign banks, with more than 550 foreign companies listed on the London stock exchange. We have the top international markets in insurance, futures, metals, pensions, banking, and maritime finance. Utilities (electricity, water, transport industries etc) have been colonised by private capital and the welfare state services, formerly provided by government, have become increasingly privatised, or at least run on tight economic principles. London now understands Greed to be Good.²

Some will be surprised that the UK has chosen to move away from what would appear at first sight to be the more secure base of manufacturing industry and towards reliance on the fluctuations of the financial markets but it must be remembered that just four days of trading on the financial markets yields an equivalent turnover of the whole world's transactions of goods and services for a full year. What is more alarming still is that, of that global financial dealing as much as 95% of it is totally speculative – it bears no direct relationship with what is real.

But all this is only one side of London – there is a human cost.

- Whilst London claims to be a cultural mix, yet this celebration hides the growing inequalities of wealth and power from sub-culture to sub-culture.

² Again I acknowledge my indebtedness to Doreen Massey's work *World City* (Polity Press 2007) for much of the description in this section.

- There is an intensification of poverty and of mental illness in London – especially amongst children and women
- In order to sustain itself, London pulls in skills and labour from across the country and from around the world, denuding those sending areas of skills, so perpetuating both the national and the global North/South divides.
- This spatial concentration of the power elite within certain areas of London reinforces their isolation from realities elsewhere, to such a degree that they come to believe that consumptive Greed is Good.
- This promotion of competitive individualism & self-reliance has devalued ideas of the ‘public good’.

I make two attendant reflections at this point in my paper. First, when people are asked about their cities, we find that the ‘top’ global cities, like London, are not voted by their inhabitants to be the best to live in. This begs the question, what then is the Good News, the Gospel, for London dwellers? Second, whilst London has not been at the mercy of global factors – it is no victim! – nevertheless, globalisation has played its part in the re-invention of UK’s capital. We therefore need to spend a brief moment looking at this phenomenon.

Globalisation is certainly not altogether a new phenomenon; perhaps it’s existed since trade began. Jesus certainly knew a species of globalisation in Galilee. The Herodian dynasty rode on the back of the Roman Empire to reinforce its own power and wealth, although in return the Herods had heavy tribute to pay and a responsibility to keep the peace at this extremity of the Roman Empire.. But international trade worked against the indigenous village population, just as it is apt to do today. Herod Antipas taxed all produce up to a maximum of no less than forty percent to pay for his urban building programme and army, which forced subsistence farmers into suffocating debt.

Absentee landlords were able to capitalise on this weakness and villagers who once owned their own farms and vineyards were now forced to seek casual employment by waiting around in the market-place to be hired. Jesus mentions them in his parables. The sea of Galilee, likewise, was heavily fished for the fish-processing factories that stood around the lakeside, which in turn sold the produce on to the grand houses of the city – impoverishing the local fishermen by forcing down the price of the catch.

Antipas extended his father's building programme into the north, regenerating the city of Sepphoris and creating the new city of Tiberias, both as major nodes for trade and control. Jesus would have experienced first hand this domination of agri-business, absentee landlords and foreign hegemony. He refers to all this in his preaching and confronts it in his ministry. We can likewise muse on the reason that on return from Egypt the Holy Family chose to live in Nazareth, just an hour's walk from employment opportunity in the regenerated Sepphoris – but also the site of a very recent revolutionary uprising of villagers against the globalising domination of the new towns. For more on Jesus' experience of these tensions, see my book, *Urban Ministry and the Kingdom of God*.³

Through the ages, globalisation has usually relied upon one dominant culture – be it that of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome, Venice, or the British Empire. We may feel however that using the word 'globalisation' in this way is to muddle the more recent experience of internationalism with imperialism. However, since the word 'globalisation' was invented for a 1970s advert for American Express cards, we might think that the 'globalisation' mind-set could be a blind or pretence for American imperial expansionism. This argument may not be easy to maintain however when we consider how some companies have grown so vast that they have cut loose from their homeland and have attained an international independence from the USA, or for that matter, any other nation. Most certainly we must admit that one thing at least differentiates the imperialisms of the past from our more recent experience of globalisation and that is the sheer velocity of the latter. In recent years the velocity of globalisation has increased to such a extent that we may legitimately speak of a new 'turbo-capitalism'.

Let's consider the causes of globalisation. There are three motors of contemporary globalisation which work together dynamically. The first is Technology. The advent of electronic technology has enabled finance to move around the world to its own advantage at the click of a button – it happens in milliseconds. The World Wide Web has also played its part in the homogenisation of trading practices and has reinforced

³ See Laurie Green, *Urban Ministry and the Kingdom of God* (SPCK 2003) for further information and bibliography

American English as the common language of the market place. We are well aware too that it is not only finance but also human capital which now flows around the world on cheap flights – and these great flows of population are changing the face of our cities. This first motor of globalisation is dynamically intertwined with a second motor – politics. The 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall made the East easy pickings for neo-liberal capital whilst Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and Helmut Kohl set about deregulating market systems, privatising welfare and utilities and demolishing labour rights. Having thus demolished those forces which held the worst effects of the market at bay they were then able to convince the western democracies that ‘there is no alternative’ to the market – a slogan that soon became known as TINA.

The third motor of globalisation is of course Economics. Freed by the new neo-liberal politics and the UK deregulation of the markets, economics became God. Now everything was to be measured by money. And due to the dynamic interplay of these three motors, new technology, neo-liberal politics, and the power of economics, cities around the world now have to respond to new pressures and parameters if they are to flourish. We can list some of these global factors:

- Whilst production has moved South, we note that decision-making remains in the West. There is a new colonialism at play here – we may wonder whether British Imperialism is as dead as it pretends to be.
- Cities demand food and provisions – and so they suck them in from locations around the world. This is known as the city’s ‘footprint’.
- Cities are made to compete with one another rather than co-operate, in order to win for themselves a share in global investment.
- Cities get westernised – the ‘make-over’. They begin to look alike so that each particular city loses its special identity and its heritage in order to compete for capital investment. (Look at the western-style clean up for the tourists around Madurai’s Temple)
- Skilled workers are siphoned off to more wealthy cities.
- The ‘back-room’ jobs which service the wealthy, such as call centres, are sent to poorer areas which are staffed sometimes by better educated people than their masters, but at terribly low wages.

- Those areas which do not serve the wealthy cities can find dis-investment happening to them so suddenly that it isolates them and sends them to the margins. This is especially evident in Africa at present, although Chinese investment there may reverse that trend.
- Urban polarisation – the wealthy elite start to exist at the expense of a growing poor in the increasingly competitive culture.
- This leads in turn to a growing worry about urban stability and sustainability. The poor see the riches of the wealthy on TV and film, and wake up to the injustice of it.
- Other cities become more aware of their powerlessness and may even begin to internalise it (they begin to act like colonial subalterns)
- As humanity flows around the globe from city to city, so they acquire ‘glocal’ identities. The answer to where people belong becomes increasingly complex when their family is in one location, their work in another, and their boss in another. Some spend their life travelling – modern-day nomads, having to find ways to belong without viable roots.
- You can continue this list of urban responses to globalisation from your own Asian experience, but I want to pause here for a moment and pose a question for you to ponder.

The question is this. Does my London story of neo-liberal wealth and market expansion, with its knock-on to cities around the world, sound at all relevant to your situation here on the Indian sub-continent or is it alien to your experience? Is there a relationship between my abundant wealth as a Londoner and your poverty here in India? Or, to put it another way, is my city more wealthy than yours because its people are cleverer, work harder or are more blessed by God? I put it to you that none of these reasons are reasonable. Is it not more likely that my London is more wealthy than anything here because London is the inheritor of an oppressive history which leaves it with a legacy of advantage in a globalising world? What’s more, we have found ways to perpetuate our advantage which are so subtle and devious that even we in London don’t see them. I would say that London continues to dominate by using clever discriminatory trade structures, cultural infiltration by means of TV, advertising, western-style education and so on. And third, we offer the Indian sub-continent a new god, money.

That final proposition leads me now to suggest that there are some theological issues which demand our attention, as follows – and I offer some biblical references to aid our reflections.

Idolatry

- The world city expects us to put Mammon (the power of money) at the heart of our thinking and doing – but who and what would we prefer to worship? (Matt 4:8-10)
- The wealthy elites must be baffled to read the Magnificat – ‘the mighty shall be put down from their thrones’, ‘the rich sent away empty’ (Luke 1:46-56) Has Christianity any place for wealth when it is derived from domination?
- The Trinity of God models for us an equal partnership of differences. What is the nature of the partnership between the rich West and the South? (John 20:21-22)
- I have suggested that the present hegemony is creating a homogenisation of our cities(‘MacDonaldisation’). Is to have this single style dominating to deny God’s gift of diverse cultures? (Genesis 11:1-9 & Acts 2:1-11)
- The ‘Globalisation’ mind-set makes us all think we are subordinate to the structures of trade and the marketplace – that we have no power to change things, but only to become better subjects of global capital and economy. Is humanity this powerless? Jesus sends us out to change the world. (Matt 28:18-20)

Welcoming the Other

- God has always known the diversity that we only now experience – he created it (Genesis 1:20-31) But now, due to global flows, we too have to learn how to meet and deal with otherness in the midst. But in worship, the Christian actually seeks to be open to the ultimate Otherness of God and through this overwhelming, to meet his/her true self. (Colossians 3:1-4) Will we meet our true selves by being open to the other in our cities? Will we meet God in the Other?

- Rather than blaming others or ourselves about the heritage of the old dominating empires, we need to progress from guilt or anger to solidarity (*koinonia*). We must all become internationalists – and see one another in fellowship rather than competition. (Mark 10:35-40)
- Discernment is required regarding how to deal with the creaming-off by wealthy cities of the skills of other poorer places. What is the right balance between individual advancement (where individuals choose to move to find employment for their skill) and community advancement (a community doing well by sucking in skill from elsewhere)? Must individual advancement always be to the disadvantage of the community they leave? (Psalm 72)

The Trinitarian reality of Interdependence

- As production is pushed to the South so industrial pollution increases there, while the rich Western nations accumulate and waste resources, So it is that both the rich and the poor nations end up despoiling the planet. The person of faith must open the eyes of the blind. (Matt 12:13-17)
- We must establish international links and partnerships, through church networks, fair trade agreements, etc. This requires cooperation between cities rather than competition! There is after all an alternative to this economic domination. (Matthew 6:10-12)
- I said earlier in this paper that London is now all about finance. But actually that is not true, even though it is the common assumption. Judging everything by economics is to blank out other important players by assuming the world is just a market place and not a place of mutual conversation – and London is full of human interaction and complexity which cannot be measured by economic calculation. Similarly, some mind-sets blank out what others have to offer (e.g. calling a large part of the world the ‘under-developed world’ implies inferiority of culture) (Colossians 3:10-11)

Empowerment of the Oppressed

- To talk of ‘diversity’ implies a simple plurality, but there are power tensions and inequalities which must be addressed – (cf. God’s option for the poor throughout scripture)

- Prophetic action and sacramental Signs of the Kingdom can still be discerned in the city. There are many sparks of light. (Luke 19:235-46)
- The abiding presence of the Christian community (and others of good-will) living alongside or as the poor, invites new thinking and modes of life. (Luke 24:49)
- Seeing it whole increases clarity of the mind and energy for change (we must therefore think and speak in ‘Body of Christ’ language)
- Cities are still not all the same. And different styles of city will require different styles of analysis and evangelism. (cf Paul’s different letters to different communities) Cities are not all the same even though globalisation would be prefer them to be so that global capital can operate easily anywhere without hindrance.
- We must remember always to ask the question – ‘what is the Good News for the poor?’ Is it the same as Good News for the rich? Or are we setting up a binary opposition between rich and poor which blames human beings rather than their constructs?

Biblical end-note

- Jesus weeps over the City (Luke 19:41) – and this alone is sufficient to make us give our all to the welfare of the city and of its children. For this task Jesus promises us the resources we will need when he says, “Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49)

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