

International Development and the Kingdom of God

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Let me start by considering a character from the Hebrew Scriptures. Jeremiah the prophet stands in the Temple with a wooden yoke across his shoulders. The yoke represents what Jeremiah understands to be the harsh realities of history laid upon the people by their God. But Hananiah believes that history must simply give way to the ideals of religion so he breaks Jeremiah's symbolic yoke. Jeremiah believes that God is concerned for history and context – that God takes the 'moment' seriously. So he returns to the temple, this time with a yoke of iron across his shoulders. The people will be exiled to Babylon – they will be carried north-east by the relentless historical forces of an increasingly global market and military machine. History will out! Hananiah represents Religion as Ideology, but that idea has to make way for the realities of history, says Jeremiah. The prophet must read the Signs of the Times, and address God's new future.

These same tensions continue to this day wherever God is doing a new thing. For example, we might assume that the definition of community that we've grown accustomed to must forever hold true – that every community must have a boundary to indicate who belongs, a margin beyond which one does not belong. We must know who is 'in' and who is 'out' of a community. So when we are challenged today by the Development debate to look for new definitions of community – to ask afresh who should be in and who should be out – are we angry alongside Hananiah and say this does not fit the old ideology, or do we say with Jeremiah that God can do a new thing? This new thing, this 'Kingdom of God community' where the boundaries are porous, where there is a strong centre but no excluding boundary, seems highly improbable. The old ideology says that someone must be marginalised. But Jesus takes those from the margin of the old community (the man with the withered hand, the little child, the leper) and brings them to the centre. He takes all our presumptions about community – and therefore about exclusion and marginalisation – and turns them inside out. His Kingdom of God is a new 'community', with a new definition!

Let me turn next to a prophet of our own day. I am arrested by these words of Moltmann:

"We are not theologians because we are religious; we are theologians because in the face of this world we miss God. We are crying out for his righteousness and justice and are not prepared to come to terms with mass death on earth."

He then goes on to say:

"But for me theology also springs from God's love for life – the love for life that we experience in the presence of the life-giving Spirit and that enables us to move beyond our resignation and begin to love life here and now. These are also Christ's two experiences of God: the Kingdom of God and the cross, and because of that they are the foundations of Christian theology as well: God's delight and God's pain. It is out of the tension between these two that hope is born for the kingdom in which God is wholly in the world and the world is wholly in God."

['Theology in the Project of the Modern World', in A Passion for God's Reign, ed Volf. Eerdmans '98]

Let me stay for a moment with 'God's pain' - "Why have you forsaken me?" Moltmann likes to warn us not to rush so excitedly into pondering post-modernism without first acknowledging what he calls the present 'sub-modernity'. For the folly of modernism has brought with it the impending death of our planet and the impoverishment of the majority of the world's population. The 'development' of the industrialised wealthy nations, he explains, has been at the expense of other nations and of nature, and now continues at the expense both of the developing countries and of forthcoming generations.

The story is well known. From the seventeenth century on, European traders bought African slaves, took them to America where they were exchanged for gold, cotton, and so on, which was then taken back to Europe. The point is this: those profits provided the investment capital for the industrialisation of Western Europe. We have now turned our resultant luxury into their international debt and we further benefit from the cheap labour in the countries we have thus made poor. We have devastated the natural environment and driven rural populations into the teaming new megacities, so overpopulated that they are quite unable to sustain decent standards of human life. If the poor try to escape this slavery they are branded as 'bogus' refugees at the fortified borders of the nations that have grown rich at their expense. God hurts, and how Mammon prospers.

But Moltmann spoke not only of God's pain but also of God's delight. The cross, yes, but also the Kingdom - the will of God done on earth as it is in heaven. So what is this "will of God on earth"? In development terms, how does it cash out?

All development work relies on the assumption that what is being offered, the target of the development, is at its heart good and beneficial for all. Most of our contemporary development programmes assume western capitalism to be good and beneficial and that under-developed nations need to be incorporated into that trade and economic system so that they too can benefit. The cry of the developer is, "Come on in, the water's lovely." But amidst the clamour of would-be bathers we also begin to hear the response, "but your water is contaminated, so we don't want your questionable water." Essentially it is an accusation that the goodies on offer are contaminated by the strings that are attached to them. It is instructive to remember how Jesus responded to similar pressures.

Jesus himself had been schooled in a Nazareth carpentry and masonry shop. No doubt his family had been attracted to the area when they came from Egypt because of the availability of work now that Herod was reconstructing the demolished city of Sepphoris. The city had been demolished because of an uprising of local Galilean political sentiment. Then, when Jesus was just twenty, work began on the new city of Tiberias - and the only reason for its existence was to divert foreign magnates and traders to the west of the Sea of Galilee in order further to integrate the Galilee under Herod Antipas into the global trade-structures of the surrounding empires. Jesus lived in a Galilee where local culture and traditional economic relationships were now being overwhelmed by global forces and foreign development, and he does not appear to welcome it. Indeed, having earlier benefited from it in the carpenter's workshop he makes the decision to leave the trade and take local fishermen with him into a new relationship with the powers that be, urging the populace to search for a wellbeing for themselves and society which starts from a premise of a radically different nature.

I therefore now want to talk about relationships and the quality of relationships. Strange then that I begin by talking about money? But money is a symbol of our human

transactions – it is a signifier of relationships, and therefore poverty – the lack of money – is but a symptom of poor relationships. If our relationships are unjust then our trade and the distribution of money will signify that injustice. As my friend Peter Selby has it, “Money is the crucial test of *koinonia*.” [*Koinonia*, the Greek word means ‘commonality’, or better ‘the quality of relationships’] The quality of our relationships says Jesus, should mirror the quality of the relationship that God wishes to have with us. “They will know you are *my* disciples by this – that you love one another.” Again, only the relationship of love can make three become one – so the three persons of the Holy Trinity are united by love. And since we are created in God’s image, we likewise should love. The whole Law and the Prophets can be summed up in this, says Jesus, that we should love God and our neighbour as ourselves.

This mirrored Trinitarian love is a love which sets free, and yet the key passage of the Hebrew tradition related to freedom, the Exodus, is not the key motif taken up by Jesus nor by the early Church. Exodus is not the best story for Jesus. For Jesus is not advocating freedom *as escape*. Quite the reverse. Jesus eats the Passover meal of the Exodus story but then he does *not* escape. On the contrary, Jesus teaches his disciples that they will find their freedom and their salvation in relational engagement. He speaks of the Kingdom community as infiltrating the wider community as leaven and salt – engaging in this loving *koinonia* fellowship even with the so-called ‘enemy’. This is indeed an essential and astonishing feature of Jesus’ Kingdom message. Relationships of this order are not merely reform, they are salvation. This is not merely development, this is transformation. This is Development as Kingdom of God, for to come face to face with the alienated and together to experience the grace of reconciled relationship – that is to meet God ‘in the midst’, where the Kingdom is born among us.

This is why Jesus begins his inauguration of the Kingdom by calling all people to new awareness and a sense of repentance: “The Kingdom of God is at hand! Repent and believe the Good News.” [Mark 1 v.15] Whilst the Thatcher era was pleased to chant ‘there is no alternative’ (TINA) Jesus inaugurates the Kingdom of God on the basis of alternative – a completely new mind-set. *Metanoia*, usually translated as ‘repentance’ is better rendered ‘opening oneself to a totally alternative mind-set and way of life’. *Metanoia* repentance is a conscientisation, an awareness of how things really are. It is an awareness which demands change and self-sacrifice. This is why Jesus repeatedly performs miracles of transformation of awareness, giving sight to the blind. He heals the paralytic so that he is no longer dependant on others to carry him. He heals the paralytic from the debt of sin and thereby makes him independent. He can take up his own bed and walk. His awareness is transformed and he can now have a new quality of relationships. Once we are aware that our development programmes may flatten the genius of a so-called ‘under-developed nation’ and keep them dependent, then it is possible to detect that better ways must and can be found for rich and poor nations to be in relationship. Without *metanoia* our development programmes will turn out to be just more of the same dependency by another name. The paralytic will still be carried by his friends.

It seems to me that this is part of the reason why Jesus chooses the most radical life-style option. He is not born alongside the poor but as the poor and bids his followers be the same. The Church alongside the poor is still inclined to carry the bed for the paralytic. The Church as the poor, or a development agency as the poor, has the awareness to know that there is no salvation, no forgiveness of sins, without the radical shift to post-colonial, post-imperial relationships.

Jesus begins to create his new community, the new Israel. Through his parables, his signs, his sacraments, he points to the Kingdom of God, and teaches his new community to pray, "thy Kingdom come." The prayer then goes on to describe this Kingdom as a society of mutually enriching repentance. We pray God to "forgive us our trespasses" on condition that "we forgive those who trespass against us". It is mutual forgiveness. So the poor have to forgive the rich as the rich have to forgive the poor. Here is no room for recrimination by the poor or for self-justification by the rich, but it provides the basis for a quality of relationship between the two from which mutually nourishing structures of trade, work and community can be built. Poor labour relations between rich and poor are an insult to the creator God, for anything which alienates us from our work mars the image of the creator God in us. This is why labour relations between rich and poor are so important to the essence of what it is to be God's creature – for to be alienated from our work is, as Marx pointed out, to be less than fully human. The mutually forgiving relationships of the Kingdom put right in us the image of the creator God, by allowing us to be at one with our own creativity, and to work with the environment and with one another. We should not be alienated from either. Another reason why development matters!

But relationships of this quality, with the environment, with society and with our own creativity, call for self-restraint on the part of the aggrieved poor, and self-sacrifice on the part of the rich. It is not going to be easy. And it is instructive therefore to note that it is precisely these two graces of self-restraint and self-sacrifice that are both evident in the incarnation of Christ, who inaugurates the Kingdom. The incarnation – this 'down to earth' act of self-limitation by the Godhead in the Son is the ultimate act of self-restraint and self-sacrifice. And this self-sacrifice turns out to be the key mark of his Kingdom. Status, wealth and power give way to the inclusion of the marginalised and rejected.

For the sake of all this, Jesus engaged in a courageous ministry of education by word and action, and calls upon the Church to do the same. He breathed on his followers the Holy Spirit who gives life and freedom to the human imagination. So when we immerse ourselves in our traditions of bible, sacraments, theology, liturgy – from that mix, inspired by the freedom of the Holy Spirit, come fresh understandings, a renewed quality of relationships, and a praxis to suit. We simply begin to see development in a different way. For example, the biblical traditions, inspired by the Spirit, will teach us that justice, after all, can be partisan rather than blind. When "justice flows like a mighty river" crushing all before it, it is not justice as we often picture it, as a careful weighing of evidence and argument. Here is justice which will no longer be gainsaid. Biblical justice hears our "brother's blood crying out from the ground" and comes in vengeance. To create trade agreements so that there is an equal, level playing field for all nations when it is clear that the poor nations have no chance of competing equally with the rich and powerful, is to offer anything but biblical justice. Level playing fields may issue from blind, western justice, but not from biblical justice.

A further example. While some may think our talk of the Kingdom to be fantasy, Spirit-inspired imagination will question instead the reality of our present financial structures. The financial markets rely on the unfounded belief that 'Futures' are more than a charade – that international finance is more than merely pieces of paper or figures on a screen. But it's all a figment of the collective imagination. The Kingdom of God is more real than any of that! More real than international finance! And which one do we allow to drive the global market?

And while we're speaking of 'futures', let's remember that the Kingdom of God is the absolute future writ large in the present. It is born of hope although it is firmly based on reality – the reality of the resurrection of Christ, the Kingdom's inaugurator. That is why we can live now 'as if' the Kingdom is already here, for in many respects it is. It is not a fantasy. The eschatological nature of the Kingdom pulls us forward into the future, for the Kingdom is now, but not yet. To have such a future reference makes us always ask where we think our present actions are leading in the future. What is the aim, the end point, of our development programmes? Who will bear the cost now and in the future? Who will be the true beneficiaries and why? It's a future reference, so often omitted by the so-called developers.

Finally, I want to stress just what a challenge all this is. For to engage in Kingdom activity is to seek to eradicate from the globe the very injustice and suffering that some non-believers would say proves there is no God at all. The suffering of the world, which for some proves there is no God, prompts us to work for God's justice, God's perfect society, the Kingdom of God on earth. In some senses we have to do that in the face of the facts of suffering! But that is the beauty of faith – we will not know whether our work was ultimately futile until the Kingdom comes, or does not come, in all its glory. But the Lord's Prayer bids us respond in faith that God's will can be done "on earth as it is in heaven" – and in that way we have the privilege of 'hallowing the name' of God, and we work and pray for mutual Development as an earnest of the Kingdom. That's why Development matters.