

ANNUAL SERVICE FOR LEOMINSTER DEANERY SYNOD

Address by Sir Leslie Fielding, Reader

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LOVE IN A COLD CLIMATE : MAKING POVERTY HISTORY?

The scripture readings at this Eucharist, from St. John's Gospel and St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, are all about Love – God's love for us; our love of the Christ and of each other.

But is there such a thing as love in a cold climate? We are certainly into chilly, troubled, times on planet earth.

Climate change is on its way, with no clear consensus on what to do about it. World population is increasing exponentially – from 6.5 billion today to a predicted 9.1 billion in 2050. (Of these, 3 billion will then be living in China and India. The entire increase will be taking place in the poorest countries). Poverty, malnutrition and avoidable medical problems are rife in many developing countries, some of them categorised, in the jargon, by the acronym "LICUS" (lower income countries under strain). Hundreds of millions in today's world struggle to survive on less than a dollar a day. The gap between the poorest and the richest countries has continued to widen. While some developing countries prosper, and others somehow drag themselves up by their own bootstraps, yet others have stayed stuck in the mire of debt, disease and economic dysfunctionality.

For Mr. Blair and others, this is the "Year of Africa". Tragically much of Africa, despite the high volume of development assistance and financial aid which it has received over the past twenty years, seems a "basket case".

Love in a cold climate is also a problem even in the relative comfort of the UK. The claims on the government and the tax payer appear heavy and unending, whether over transport, health and the public services, law and order, defence against terrorism, the closure of factories due to foreign competition and the "outsourcing" of "back office" jobs to India and elsewhere.

Yet, despite all that, love somehow continues to make the world go round. We can see it, in all the excitement currently generated by the Trade Justice and "Make Poverty History" campaign. We seem on course for a renewed international effort to ease the debt problems of developing countries, a massive increase in development assistance to them, and a further opening up of Western markets to the things they have to sell. All this, for us Christians, is good news and gospel-compatible.

As always, when horses get the wind in their tails, there is much galloping and prancing; but also much tugging at curb chains and general reining in. Those in the rear cry “forward”; and those in the front cry “back”.

Thus celebrity stallions, like Bob Geldof, are calling for a million demonstrators to lobby the upcoming Summit of the G8 Group of the world’s richest countries, at Gleneagles. Not to be outdone, the Bishop of Argyll is saying: “Why not 2 million”? On the other hand, the broadsheets and serious periodicals, despite their differing political affiliations, are challenging the unsound economics of some of the campaigning. Not only the Spectator but also the Economist; not only the Times but also the Independent and the Financial Times, have called for greater caution and sense of responsibility. Government ministers, desirous of adjusting their sails to the zephyrs of public agitation, but also mindful that they cannot write blank cheques, are in an awkward position, even if quite rightly determined to do *something*.

Naturally, the churches are in the thick of it, but without any immunity from criticism. To quote from the editorial in the Financial Times of 27 April, comments on Rowan Williams’s sermon the day before:

“The leftish Church of England vicar wringing his hands about social problems has passed into comic cliché. Yesterday it was made flesh with an intervention by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, agonising publicly about the downside of free trade. True, he holds more sensible and nuanced views than Christian Aid, the church-based charity whose 60th anniversary he was celebrating. But he still came too close to questioning the benefits of liberalisation”.

Poor Rowan Williams. But, we do run risks, as Christians, when we move from the moral imperative of “what” should be done (in this case, the relief of poverty and hunger) to “how” it should be done (in the Archbishop’s case, entanglement with the political and economic doctrines of Christian Aid).

In the old joke, to every complex international, politico-economic problem there is always one answer which is simple, clear-cut, convincing – but wrong.

Certainly, where aid and debt are concerned, while the moral aspect is clear, the secular realities are murky. If the West really knew what to do to resolve Africa’s problems, quickly and effectively, it would have done so years ago. Indiscriminate debt relief, and massive new financial flows, cannot prudently be applied across the board, without selectivity, if it is not to enrich further the dictators, the corrupt and incompetent bureaucracies and the personal and tribal nepotisms for which parts of Africa are notorious. It is not only that we do not want the money to end up in the wrong hands in *Africa*, but also that we do not want it to end up in numbered bank accounts in *Switzerland*! Short of re-establishing colonial government, there is not much, in the short to medium term, that we can do to improve governance and promote democracy in those developing countries which so sorely need both, if they are to pick themselves up by their own efforts as well as with our help.

In the coming months, Christians like us – whatever our particular economic orientations and political persuasions – must consult our individual consciences as well as listen carefully to preachers, politicians and popstars. We need to reflect on what the Bible tells us. Above all, we need to say our prayers.

I will not, from this pulpit, tell you what *you* should think. But I will tell you what *I* think – however fallibly, even if in good faith. I will list the things I *won't* do; and the things I *will* do.

Thus:

- I will *not* take part in the Edinburgh demo, which will waste police time and money and serve no real purpose – even if the Anarchists, the Anti-Globalists and the Weirdos enjoy their day;
- I refuse to demonise my friends and former colleagues in the EC, WTO, the WB and the IMF, who are not the rabid right-wing capitalists which some Trade Justice literature paints them as being, but are professionals who are doing their best, within their limitations;
- I will not say it is all the fault of Uncle Sam and Western Capitalism. Remember that American official and private charity assistance for developing countries is five times our own. Nor do I think that Africa will take off if only the multi-national companies were regulated on Marxist lines; nor that trade will surge if it can be “managed” by the local President’s henchmen, irrespective of market forces;
- I will not comfort myself with mindless slogans. The argument between advocates of so-called “free” and so-called “fair” trade is meaningless. What we need to see is “more” trade;
- I will not contribute money to Christian Aid, because – unquestionably well intentioned and useful as it is – I think it devotes too much of its resources to political activity and to salaries and administration and not enough to poverty relief at the sharp end.

On the other hand, to speak positively:

- I will give more to charities which are directly focussed on relief in the field. The obvious example, in this Deanery, is our direct support for needy fellow Anglicans in Tengeru. I shall also give more money to the “Save the Children Fund” and “Médecins Sans Frontières”.
- I will argue, and urge the government to agree, that export subsidies in the rich countries which curb or deny export opportunities to poor countries, should be phased out completely. (I think of EU subsidies for sugar and US subsidies for cotton).
- I will support the Government in their effort to increase overseas aid and step up debt relief, even if this means higher UK taxes, or

less money spent on other crying domestic needs in this country. We cannot do the right thing on the cheap. There is no cost-free magic, solution to international poverty.

- Finally, I will say my prayers regularly and ardently for all politicians, civil servants and international functionaries who are working to eradicate poverty in the world. I am by no means certain that they will easily – or, even, ever – fully succeed. But they deserve the comfort and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Even in a cold climate, there has to be love. Poverty must be relieved. There is no alternative but to go for it; and, in doing so, to put our trust in God.

I mentioned earlier the need to listen to what God tries to tell us, through Scripture. We have already heard the Lord speak in the Gospel according to St. John. I will conclude with these words from the First Epistle General of John: “If a man has enough to live on, and yet when he sees his brother in need shuts up his heart against him, how can it be said that the divine love dwells in him?”.