

MAKING THE MOST OF A CRISIS

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Trinity I (Civic Service)

Lev 25:1-17 and Luke 4:16-21

12 noon
Rochester Cathedral

I'm a great fan of the cartoonist Gary Larson. This year, gripped by Darwin fever, I think we all ought to be issued with copies of Larson's cartoon "Great Moments In Evolution", which pictures 3 basketball-playing fish, holding baseball bats in their flippers, dolefully swimming around the edge of a small island, into the middle of which they have hit their baseball, now tantalisingly out of reach. There is no caption, but you just know that they are thinking 'what if.....?....I wonder maybe if I could?....perhaps if I just.....'.

The cartoon is brilliant. It captures with great humour those transitional states, the creative places between evolutionary leaps, those key moments in which the energy for profound change is summoned up.

In some ways the crisis we find ourselves in as a society, politically and economically at the moment, isn't so very different from swimming around a desert island with baseball bats in our flippers, trying to reach the ball we've lost.

We've made some extraordinary mistakes, got ourselves into one very big mess, and I don't think anyone is very sure how it is all going to end. We have, for the first time since the 1920s and 30s, come perilously close to global financial and economic melt-down. Green shoots notwithstanding, we're at a key moment in the evolution of our society, because I think we know deep down that this time we've hit our ball out of reach and we're not sure what to do about it.

This sermon is about the Credit Crunch. Have you noticed how easy it is to be wise after this extraordinary event, how much has been said and written about the stupidity of others (the banks, mainly)? It is, of course, much harder to be wise before the next event. But if we are to be wise before the next event, we will ask ourselves this: how does our experience in this crisis affect the way we are going to do things for the future?

Did you hear Barack Obama's Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, come up with a pithy saying recently? He said: **"always make the most of a crisis"**. It is at moments of crisis that you begin to think about things differently. It's not until you hit your ball into the middle of the island that you begin to imagine that instead of merely swimming you might just be able to walk.....

Let me tell you at the start that I'm not planning to offer a whole lot of answers today. Instead, I want to make a plea for politicians and church leaders to work together on these issues, on re-imagining the values that we need to do things differently for the future.

My main argument is that religion has been working on the hard, practical economic and social realities of credit and debt for literally thousands of years, and might have some insights that would be of interest to politicians and policy-makers.

Let me begin at the end today. That is, I want to give you my conclusion first. Credit and Debt is not primarily a political or an economic question, it is a religious question which is central to Christianity. That may shock, surprise or even annoy some people who want Christianity to be about 'spiritual' things, but I am increasingly convinced that Christianity came to birth in a social setting where debt

was **the** distinctive and pervasive feature, and that the early faith took its identity in large measure from this fact.

There is a fascinating and ancient idea hidden away in the pages of the Old Testament. It was a form of social experiment, all the more tantalising because we don't have any historical records to tell us whether anyone was ever brave enough to try it, or if they did, whether it worked or not. It was called the principle of Jubilee, and it was designed largely to protect the poor.

In a simple economy like that of ancient Israel, people could fall into poverty in many ways - through bad harvests, sickness, the conscription of key family members to serve in the army, divorce, defeat in war, or simply through poor judgement, profligate living, and so on. There were only 2 basic options for the poor - either to sell themselves into some form of slavery (within which I include prostitution), or to take out loans.

The Jubilee principle was a radical solution which ensured that people would not be kept in poverty or slavery forever. It recognised - 3000 years before Marxism told the world - that poverty and slavery are self-perpetuating, and that it takes some form of legislation to tackle ingrained social and economic problems such as these.

But beyond this, the Jubilee principle recognised that debt, poverty and slavery are essentially questions of **community**. In God's economy people are accountable to one another and responsible for one another.

So every 50 years, heralded by the blowing of the ram's horn - or 'jobel', hence Jubilee - all land and property would revert to its original owner. There would be a total redistribution of wealth and property back to the equalities of capital shared among the tribes of Israel at the beginning of their occupation of the land. Slaves would be released, debts written off, land and possessions restored.

The Jubilee year meant in effect that no-one would be permanently indebted or enslaved, but would have the opportunity to begin anew, and to have freedom, land and possessions restored.

Jubilee. Utopian, idealistic, never implemented and quite possibly unachievable – what a previous Director of Christian Aid, Michael Taylor, once memorably called **An Impossible Possibility**.

Now move forward 1000 years to 1st century Palestine.

It is undoubtedly true that debt was a central part of the social environment in which both Jesus and Christianity emerged. It was a time in which large sums of money flowed into cities like Jerusalem through trade; but there were high demands for taxes and tribute levied on the poor. Those who were rich had significant sums of money which they needed to invest, and the poor had reason enough to borrow. It was a situation not unlike the petrodollar glut of the 1970s, or indeed like the credit casino of the last 15 years, with loads of money chasing lots of willing borrowers.

The result, in Jesus' day, was that many of the peasant farmers in the villages - subsistence farmers working the land with their families - were easily led into debts which they were unable to repay. Is this sounding familiar?

So the pages of the Gospels are littered with fascinating glimpses into this world of the powerful rich and the financially enslaved poor:

- Jesus told stories about prisoners who would never be released until every last penny of their debt had been paid, or servants liberated from debt by the state who did not share that same generosity with those indebted to them. He told another story about a creditor and 2 debtors, illustrating the gratitude someone in debt might feel if released from that debt
- The Lord's Prayer itself contains the line 'release us from our debts as we release the debts of others'; a sentiment we have spiritualised in terms of forgiveness, but which in original intent was financial in nature

- Jesus once famously ejected the moneylenders from the temple - a symbolic act of condemnation at 'money making money'
- The Gospels give an insight into a burning political question about paying tribute to Caesar. No doubt by the time the Gospels were written down, with Christianity persecuted throughout the Roman world, it was seen as a question of allegiance to Rome or not, but in Jesus' day the burning issue would have been a hard-nosed financial one - should we pay high rates of tax when they deliver us into debt?
- And then there's the sort of people who were drawn to Jesus. On one hand the prostitutes and outcasts, those who would have been driven there by debt; and on the other people like Levi and Zacchaeus, those who had grown fat on the ill-gotten gains of extortion, for whom repentance involved liberating others from debt.

And so it goes on. Read it for yourselves, with fresh eyes. Start looking for evidence of the central question of debt in the Gospels, and you begin to see it all in a new light. It's everywhere!

But nowhere is it more clearly expressed than in the words from Luke's Gospel which introduce us to what Jesus' ministry is going to be all about:

Luke 4:18-19 - *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.'*

'The acceptable year of the Lord', an unmistakable reference to the year of Jubilee.

It's a direct Greek translation of the phrase used in Leviticus 25 to describe the Jubilee Year. There is not a scholar on earth who would dispute the fact that in these words, taken from Isaiah 61:1-2, Jesus is seen as bringing in the fulfilment of the ultimate Jubilee in which debts are released and slavery redeemed on a messianic scale. It's been dubbed 'The Nazareth Manifesto', and make no mistake it is the essence of what Christianity is about.

What I'm trying to say is simple. Jesus Christ was born into a world characterised in large measure by the experience of debt. His life and message was about the impossible possibility of releasing people from its grip into the fullness of life which God had promised. He attracted large numbers of those who knew from first hand experience what debt was like. He used imagery and stories drawn from these experiences in order to illustrate what God and the Kingdom was like. And he urged within his followers those things which might make the impossible a possibility:

- an experience of divine encounter
- a generosity of spirit in response to the generosity of God
- a simplicity of lifestyle which would not encourage debt
- an acceptance of responsibility towards one another in community
- a commitment to stewardship rather than ownership

These things conflate the religious with the social with the economic with the political in one gorgeous and outrageous cocktail. If we are to make the most of this crisis, if this is to be a great moment in social and political evolution, then it requires a really positive dialogue and partnership between Christianity and Politics, between faith and socio-economics, to bring about any change in our understanding of credit, debt and liberation.

So here we are, swimming around that desert island, looking plaintively at our ball lying tantalisingly out of reach. And we think to ourselves 'what if.....?...I wonder maybe if we could?...perhaps if we just.....' and from somewhere inexplicable the leap of imagination occurs, the impossible becomes a possibility, and this crisis becomes the best thing that ever happened to us.....