

## **Readings:**

**OT Reading: Isaiah 55: 1-11**

**Gospel: Matthew 5: 38 – 6:4**

## **Sermon: God's voice in the marketplace**

In some American cities people can order groceries on the internet, and the food is delivered to a special fridge in their home while they are at work. They can tick boxes on the on-line order form that say 'organic' or 'not nearer than two weeks before sell date,' but they never see the people who deliver or sell the food, far less the people who grew it or reared it.

For many, though, this is still a high tech dream – or nightmare, depending on your point of view. Most people in the world still get their 'groceries' as *we* might have done in biblical times. They still barter with traders who sell in small amounts directly to their customers. Street markets still thrive in villages, towns and cities around the globe, little changed, and if we were in them we would still hear stall holders calling out the local version of: "Special offer... Three for a pound, ladies... three for a pound!"

We can imagine, then, the writer of Isaiah, inspired as he walked among the traders in the market, hearing an inner voice calling out in the same style: 'Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters! He who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price!' (Isaiah 55: 1, 2). Here is a voice that offers nourishment not for the body, but for the soul. 'Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?' As we consider how to spend our money in the marketplaces of the world, God's challenge to us is still issued in the words of a market trader.

Here is a better deal, he says. I can offer you satisfaction that money can't buy. But here, also, is a warning, says the Lord. Be careful. Money can't buy satisfaction.

But sometimes, it is not so easy to hear God's voice. We are invited to seek the Lord, while he may be found, there in the ancient marketplace of the Bible, but the marketplaces in which we trade today are complex, even overwhelming at times. Grocery stores offer produce from around the world, all year-round; on the internet virtual-shops are open 24-hours a day; the busiest day in shopping malls across the UK is often now a Sunday. And unless we go on holiday to some tropical paradise, we may never meet the people who grow the pineapples or bananas we expect to be available in February. How can we hear God's call in this kind of marketplace?

Here are a few ways:

- God's call in the marketplace means that our lives do not consist in the things we have. Otherwise, how could such nourishment be available to those who have no money? As Oscar Romero, the Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador, said, 'Life is not about having more, but in being more.' The prophet Isaiah promises us that if we realise this 'your soul will live.'
- We can try to act so that other people are not made poorer by the ways in which we buy and sell in the marketplace. Fair trade products guarantee producers get a better deal for themselves, their families and their communities. They are familiar sights on our grocery shelves and the fair trade market in the UK is worth more than £500 million a year, the biggest fair trade market in the world. But that's only a fraction of global trade which is worth a staggering £4,000 billion a year. Imagine if that was all fair trade. So there's still a huge task ahead of us – and every little helps. Which is why the efforts of this diocese to achieve fair trade status are so important and why I want to commend you and encourage you in that endeavour?
- We can campaign for better rules to govern the marketplaces of the world. Many of the rules that poor countries have to follow in international trade are determined by rich countries, like ours, and the international institutions that they control (like the IMF, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation). Surprisingly,

poverty is not on their agenda – and it should be. There's no reason why we can't have trade rules that:

- are devised to get rid of poverty
- are enforced to make sure the rich as well as the poor have to abide by them

But when we talk of poverty what are we talking about? Well poverty is not just a lack of hard cash. Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not being able to go to school, not knowing how to read, not being able to speak properly. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and poverty is the denial of freedom.

So what guidance does the Bible give us about what we should do in situations of injustice and unfairness? What lessons can we draw from Scripture if we want to draw up new trade rules, consistent with the Christian faith?

The first five books of the Bible are full of rules designed for the common good, focusing on fair shares, redistribution, release of slaves, remission of debts, restoration of property, and rest ... rest for the master, rest for the slave, rest for the animals and rest for the land. We've all read, and heard, and seen a lot recently about the seeming collapse of the global economy and the greed that has brought it about. And there's been a lot of agonising about how we can better regulate the market in the future so it doesn't happen again. I may be being naïve but is there not a working model there in the pages of scripture? If we want rules to govern conduct, what's wrong with starting with the rules God has given us?

Throughout scripture we catch glimpses of something we could call 'God's economy'. It's very different from the kind of economy we have come to accept. One of the central features of God's world is abundance, managed by restraint. Contrast this, then, with the basic

features of our current economic model, built as it is on engineered scarcity and unfettered human greed.

More than half the world's people – over 2.5 billion – live on less than US\$2 a day, developing countries are being bullied by us – or at least in our name - into signing trade agreements which will ruin their economies, and a child dies of poverty-related causes every three seconds.

.But, amazingly, none of the rules governing world trade sets out to address the scandal – and it is a scandal – of global poverty. Nothing could better underline the truth in Isaiah 55 that, as the Lord says: ‘my ways are not your ways.’

As our Gospel reading reminded us, the radical discipleship which Christ calls us to involves sacrifice and courage. The willingness to do more and go further than is asked of us, and the courage to confront the rich and the powerful with the injustice and unrighteousness of their policies and their actions – regardless of the cost to ourselves. Anger is not often seen as a virtue but it can be a signal that something is wrong and act as a spur to corrective action. Anger can get you out of your seat and onto the street – and we need to get angry, really angry on behalf of the world's poor. Jesus got angry... Time after time, Jesus, in his actions and his words drives those who are following him, those who are listening to him, forcing them to broaden their understanding, confronting them with the demand to love, driving them out of their comfort zone. And we have to get out of ours.

Jesus repeatedly confronts institutions, structures and attitudes that label people and exclude them, he accuses authorities and rulers of hypocrisy, self interest and neglect of duty, he particularly challenges indifference and apathy and the “but we don't do it that way!” frame of mind. He confronts the world with that one command – to love and keep on loving – regardless of cost. And we have to do the same. In God's upside down kingdom, it is ordinary people like us who are the movers and shakers – our choices and

our actions can change the world. And if we do not do the work of the kingdom then the work of the kingdom does not get done.

Three challenges then, from the centre of the marketplace:

1. Our lives could be enriched by ‘being’ rather than ‘having’; let us live more simply so that others may simply live.
2. Consumption involves moral choices and the choices we make will affect, for good or ill, the lives of people we will never know and never meet on the other side of the planet; let us resolve to share God’s heart for the poor.
3. We can add our voices to the rising clamour to change the unjust rules that blight the lives of the poor. As Paulo Friere, the great Brazilian educator and social reformer pointed out: “In the struggle between the weak and the strong, remaining silent is not to be neutral; it is to give victory to the strong.”

These are all ways in which we can respond to God’s voice in the marketplace. It’s not an exhaustive list, by any means, but it’s a start, whether we’re wandering through the market or shopping over the net. It may take some mental gymnastics to see our shopping basket as a gateway to God’s kingdom but, in it’s own way, that is exactly what it is.

(Inspired by material from Christian Aid, CAFOD and Traidcraft)

Peter Collins

Traidcraft Head of Church Relations