

Talking Cents

September 2014

Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by Rev. Prince Devanandan Secretary of the Methodist Mission and Ecumenical

When we vote...

As I was reflecting on the important factor of economy and its impact on the people of this country I came across a quote of Pope Francis on Facebook: *“The promise was that when the glass was full, it would overflow, benefiting the poor. But what happens instead, is that when the glass is full, it magically gets bigger... nothing ever comes out for the poor”*¹. The Pope has spoken out with a prophetic message for the world in accordance with the scriptures. The economic system in which we live is in the abundance of God’s creation; but we have created an artificial scarcity that contradicts the gospel.

*“Every economic and political theory or action must set about providing each inhabitant of the planet with the minimum wherewithal to live in dignity and freedom, with the possibility of supporting a family, educating children, praising God and developing one's own human potential. This is the main thing; in the absence of such a vision, all economic activity is meaningless.”*² Pope Francis has unswervingly pointed to the scandal of poverty in a world of plenty as a piercing moral challenge for the church and the whole human community.³ As people of this land of plenty, we have a calling to answer. While some of us enjoy many good things in our life time, others do not have even the very basics - food, clothing and shelter, let alone education and health care. The latter numbers are on the rise. This is highly visible in the area of child poverty in our country.

*“New Zealand was a pioneer in building a comprehensive welfare state. It attracted worldwide attention more than eighty years ago by instituting new forms of social assistance for those in need, establishing a largely publicly funded health care system and providing relatively generous financial support for all families with children. It might be expected that a country with such a legacy would have achieved and retained low rates of child poverty. But this has not been the case. Indeed, since the 1990s New Zealand has witnessed significant levels of child poverty ... Why is this? In particular, why has a society previously committed to egalitarian values and poverty alleviation tolerated substantial child poverty for more than two decades?”*⁴

We constantly hear the arguments that ‘poverty is relative’ or ‘poverty is due to lack of motivation’ and so on. Poverty may be relative, but what matters is when basic needs are not met. An example we hear about in the media is that most days some 39,000 children go to school with empty stomachs. There are people in the workforce face difficulties in feeding their children. It is not due to lack of motivation but to lack of adequate income. ‘Cost-cutting’ is an exercise that many of our corporations and business establishments enforce to increase profits. Such cost cutting includes outsourcing overseas cheap labour with Unemployment and redundancies, or underemployment for New Zealanders the result.

There are an increasing number of workers who no longer work a full week but the number of hours their employer demands, be it one or forty. Companies have the ultimate say when they want the employee and when they don’t. No hours or few hours work results in little or no

¹ <http://mediamatters.org>

² Pope Francis’ Letter to Prime Minister David Cameron for the G8 Meeting, June 17-18, 2014

³ <http://americamagazine.org/church-poor>

⁴ Boston & Chapple 2014:11 *Child Poverty in New Zealand*

income. It is a fact that the weekly costs of providing for a family do not go down when less working hours are offered by the employer. How a family can budget let alone live with some dignity with such uncertainty is beyond belief but is a cruel reality for far too many in this country.

There are other reasons behind the situation of child poverty and lack of adequate wages. Some people have an excess of income, much more than what they need. This brings us to a question of addressing causes of inequality. The general notion is that when the rich have enough it will overflow to the poor. *“Some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralised workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting.”*⁵ The poor, the powerless and the vulnerable are the victims of this theory. In a land of plenty when children go without food and other necessities it is primarily the policy makers who are responsible.

We, as Christians, cannot hide from the fact that we more often accept the unjust exploitation that is taking place in our society rather than raising a prophetic voice to address the problem. This is because *“The worship of the golden calf of old has found a new and heartless image in the cult of money and the dictatorship of an economy which is faceless and lacking any truly human goal.”*⁶

We call ourselves Christians; we are opposed to the worship of any graven images; we are committed to live a life in Christ. But the question is whether we have become worshippers of the modern-day golden calf. The gospel of prosperity we hear being pumped into our living rooms via televisions is to make all worship the golden calf. One has to ask an ethical question: does God bless a person to become rich, and how does that one generate wealth and then say God has blessed me more than the others?

The fact that needs to be in focus is *“As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality, no solution will be found for the world's problems or, for that matter, to any problems.”*⁷ To begin with for a better life for all we need a Zacchaeusan transformation in developing our economic policies. The policies published so far have very little to bring about a change in the lives of the deprived people of our society. Therefore the prophet has to keep the voice alive for the poor. *“In the meantime, if you are Christian and someone calls you a Marxist just because you are questioning why extreme poverty persists in an era of such extravagant wealth, know that you are in good company – because Jesus did it first.”*⁸

We need to bare this in mind as we look for a better world, or rather a better New Zealand for all, not just for some. AS we go to vote the failures in the structures and the disappointments in the policies placed before us by the political parties will discourage some from even casting their vote. This will not resolve the issues we face. We need to cast a vote for change, but change will not happen immediately, instead the transformation envisaged will need to be worked out by those who expect to bring about change. That will require a movement and mobilisation of everyone, both rich and poor who are committed to the wellbeing of all. One thing is certain and that is that God’s abundance will one day prevail against man made poverty.

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/11/time-pope-francis-whistleblower-poor-right-choice>

⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/the-pope/10061700/Pope-Francis-urges-global-leaders-to-end-tyranny-of-money.html>

⁷ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-raushenbush/pope-francis-unfettered-capitalism_b_4449643.html
⁸ *ibid*