

World Economic Crisis

Finding God or fearing the future?

Isaiah 5:3-10 (selection) Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briars and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it."

He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress. Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field 'til no space is left and you live alone in the land. The LORD Almighty has declared in my hearing: Surely the great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions left without occupants. A ten-acre vineyard will produce only a bath of wine; a homer of seed will yield only an ephah of grain. (NIV)

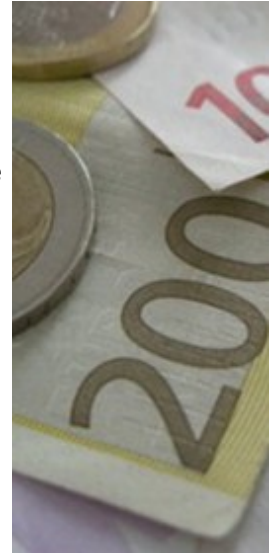
As Christians gather for worship on forthcoming Sundays, they do so as the Labour Party and then Conservatives gather for their respective conferences, against a backdrop of unprecedented economic gloom from just about every conceivable source. There is much political capital to be made, and no doubt the blame will be shooting to and fro' as the left call for George Osborne to revise his planned public spending cuts, which are likely to be staunchly defended as necessitated by the inherited deficits and debts of the previous administration.

Christians will be among the many who, bombarded by argument and counter argument, will wonder what to make of all this bewildering rhetoric. Prime Minister David Cameron describes the world economy as "staring down the barrel" while International Monetary Fund Chief, Christine Lagarde has spoken of it entering a "dangerous place". Lagarde's message is particularly depressing as she suggests that economic leaders, after almost annihilating interest rates, adding a few zeros to the balance sheets and borrowing to the hilt, have now run out of options. Nor does she believe that the commitment to act with clear and single accord, generated in the wake of the last world economic crisis, will be repeated this time around. But the arguments between left and right, I would suggest, are more a distraction from reality than a source of potential solution or blame.

It is interesting that the language of the Old Testament often draws on images of scales, measures and being weighed in the balance when seeking to describe the expectations of God, and it is perhaps this which offers a significant, if alarming insight into the whole affair. There are of course millions of people in the world who will continue their lives utterly oblivious of all of this economic turmoil - for them the luxury lifestyle of the West, which now seems increasingly under threat, might as well be a universe away. Their concerns for long term economic stability will centre around whether they can continue to scratch a subsistence living from the land on which they live, and harvest enough to feed their family and create a seed stock for next year.



We can dress it up in the language of technical economics like capital leverage, quantitative easing, fiscal stimulus, austerity measures or a whole host of other phrases of human invention, but the truth is far more simple and far more disturbing. The scales are beginning to tip, a system which has afforded a fraction of the world's nations, disproportionate amounts of wealth, is beginning to even itself out. What we describe as world economics, is in reality a system which serves and represents the interests of a relatively small contingent of its population, and it seems that this tip is rapidly sinking to the level of the rest of the iceberg. The West built its prosperity by exploiting the people and the natural resources of nations we have conquered and economically enslaved, and it is only in recent decades that many have finally embraced a glimmer of freedom. The inherited reserves are gone, and the response of creating an impression of economic activity, by inventing ever more elaborate ways of moving borrowed capital around in every decreasing circles, is finally running out of steam.



The prophets of the Old Testament no doubt heartened an uncertain and despairing nation when they spoke of a day when God's presence would be realised and embraced. They too spoke to a complacent people who were living off the inherited prosperity of previous generations, but their message of God's coming was not one of glorious return to the good old days, but of a judgement in which its national institutions would collapse under the weight of an invading oppressor. The day of the Lord was not to be a restoration of religious power and influence, but of the devout being caught up along with everyone else in the impending ruin. Their calling was to seek and hold fast to God in the midst of their struggle, not as an escape from it.

Our instinct may well be to join in the growing chorus of disaffection as pension pots dwindle, endowment shortfalls increase and shares continue in free-fall. We have somehow lulled ourselves into the belief that our cosseted lifestyles are a human right, and are outraged that our politicians and bankers are failing to deliver us from the impending economic doom. And yet at the same time we echo those Old Testament cries for justice, never daring to imagine that this might be at the cost of our own personal prosperity and comfort. If we are sensing that the balance is beginning to shift, might it be that our prayers are being answered?

When God comes, it is always on His own terms, and one of the resounding messages of Scripture is that he seldom conforms to the mainstream expectations of His people. The challenge for the Church is not to so much to participate in avoiding the inevitable, but rather to seek God in its midst. God's presence and blessing, our eternal well-being and spiritual hope and the foundations of our faith are not tied to the success of any economic system; this is a message which it may become increasingly important for His Church to appreciate and declare.

**God, whose riches of grace You have lavished upon us,
Forgive us, if we have sought to measure Your love and care,
By the material wealth that we can amass.
And forgive us where we have failed to be just stewards
Of the earth and her resources.
Give us the courage and wisdom to face the mounting uncertainty that confronts us;
Help us to seek Your ways and hear your voice within it,
Rather than simply pursuing our own interests.
Grant wisdom to economists and politicians
Who seek to maintain our systems of trade, commerce and exchange.
May they act in ways that truly embrace justice,
And may the expectations which we place upon them
Release and encourage them to do what is right.
Be with all those who will debate and discuss,
Formulate policies and promote new ideas
May they always be seekers of what is right
Rather than imposing ideals of their making.
May we be open to Your presence
Ready to receive and accept from Your hand
All that accords to Your purpose
Through Christ our Lord AMEN**

Phil Jump

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