

3 The Great Economy

Editor's note: as The Sign of Love was published in 1997, the political and economic examples date from that time, but the principles still apply and similar examples could be cited from the present day. The European Community is now the European Union, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) is now part of the World Trade Organization (WTO) – however, the WTO is not the kind of international trade organization hoped for on page 28.

IN THE PREVIOUS chapter I have argued that our celebration of the eucharist does not derive only from the 'Last Supper' narrative but is also rooted in the table fellowship of Jesus, and that this has significant consequences for our understanding of our social world. In this chapter I shall argue that 'the great feedings', the feeding of the four thousand and the five thousand, are also an essential part of the practice of Jesus which gives us the eucharist, and that this bears directly on our existence as economic beings.

In the stories of the great feedings Jesus finds himself surrounded by a huge crowd late on in the day, and the problem arises how people are to be fed:

When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.' But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' (Mark 6.35–7).

As Ched Myers has observed, Jesus challenges the disciples to use their imaginations, but they cannot.¹ They are bound by the framework of the marketplace. 'What are we supposed to do?' they ask. 'Go to the shops and buy huge quantities of bread and feed everyone?' The incredulity is exactly that of people today confronted by world poverty.

Jesus, however, has another proposal: 'Go and see how much bread there is.' In John's version it is a child who says that he has brought five rolls and a couple of fish (John 6.9). Jesus solemnly gives thanks to God, breaks and shares, as he did at all meals. What happens then? Traditionally theologians have believed in a miraculous multiplication of particles, through which the crowd was fed. It seems much more beautiful, and much more in keeping with the Jesus who refused signs to prove his messiahship, and resisted the temptation to turn stones into bread, to believe that the boy's artless willingness to share shamed others into sharing what they also had brought with them. When they do this it turns out that 'all ate and were filled' (Mark 6.42). 'The only "miracle" here is the triumph of the economics of sharing within a

¹ C. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man* (New York, Orbis, 1988), pages 205f.

community of consumption over against the economics of autonomous consumption in the anonymous marketplace.²

The eucharistic significance of the occasion was plain to the Early Church. Mark tells us that Jesus 'looked up to heaven', that he 'blessed', 'broke', and 'gave' – the actions of the eucharist – whilst John says that the crowd ate the bread, 'after the Lord had given thanks' (*eucharistesantos*).

In the history of the Church, the use and blessing of material elements in the eucharist has been taken as an affirmation of the material creation. Thus in the second century Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, speaks of the eucharist as thanksgiving for the blessings of creation. When we offer the bread and wine we remember that Christ is 'the Word through whom the trees bear fruit, the springs flow, and the earth yields "first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear"'³ This was a very important affirmation in Irenaeus' world, where Gnosticism, which despised the created order, came within a hairsbreadth of overwhelming orthodox Christianity. It is an even more important affirmation today in a world threatened as never before by piecemeal destruction through the misuse of the earth's resources and wholesale destruction through nuclear weapons. In its affirmation of the material the eucharist was and is a 'Green' sacrament, a sign of the God-given character of the material which is not there for human beings to pillage.

Green issues have attained prominence in the past thirty years partly through the campaigning efforts of groups like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth and partly because of an increasing wealth of literature documenting the problem. To take one much publicized example, it has been predicted that global warming will cause ocean levels to rise with catastrophic results for many Southern hemisphere countries. The main cause of global warming is CO₂ emissions caused by Northern hemisphere consumption patterns. The average resident of an industrial country consumes three times as much fresh water, ten times as much energy, and nineteen times as much aluminium as someone in a developing country.⁴ Dealing seriously with the problem has huge consequences for all those of us in the North. President Bush announced that 'The American way of life is not negotiable', but there is no choice but to deal with it, either by continued and increased violence against the South, or by changing our lifestyles. The earth cannot sustain present Northern consumption patterns for eight or eleven billion people.

In this context, Irenaeus' understanding of the eucharist, with its lyrical affirmation of the goodness of the earth, echoed in so many of our harvest hymns, takes on an entirely new urgency. The president of the eucharist takes and offers matter, and gives thanks for it. To do this seriously and worshipfully, which means responsibly, is

² Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, page 206.

³ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 4.18.4.

⁴ A. Them Duming, *How Much Is Enough?* (Earthscan, 1992), page 51.

to understand the eucharist as a commitment to a world where we appreciate God's gift, where it is not plundered or exploited, or cornered for the advantage of the few.

What Irenaeus did not mention was that the bread we offer is the fruit of human work, as the offertory sentence now affirms:

Blessed are you, Lord of the Universe, who gives us this bread, fruit of the earth and work of human hands. It will become for us the bread of life.

This reminds us that to produce the bread of the eucharist at least eight operations are necessary, from ploughing to marketing to baking. Each of these operations has a global economic, social and political dimension. Somebody pays somebody else to do the work. The work is done in competition or cooperation. In the global economy the production of grain is part of the balance of payments and the relation between nations. The bread of the eucharist is the bread of the economy. The liturgy is inescapably enmeshed in 'the real world' of the world economy. Let us see what is involved in that.

Innumerable recent reports and studies have drawn attention to the growing gap between the nations of the North and South, and to the growing gap between rich and poor within Northern hemisphere nations. I shall use one of the most recent of these, *The Oxfam Poverty Report*, which draws on a mass of field research from all over the world.⁵ The report speaks of the 'silent emergency' of poverty which causes thirty-five thousand children to die every day from diseases which could be prevented through access to adequate nutrition and the most basic health provision. Poverty, the report concludes, is growing – not decreasing. All over the South, levels of real wages, health standards and expenditure on education are actually falling. Why is this?

A major cause of the poverty of the South is the asset-stripping which went on during the colonial era, but I will not go into that, but concentrate on contemporary factors. The Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987⁶ maintained that 'Among the many causes of the African crisis, the workings of the international economy stand out.' Unfair trade, in one way or another, is at the heart of many of the problems.

To highlight just a few of the aspects this involves we can single out first the protectionism which persists despite the dogma of the so-called 'free market'. It has been said that the breakdown in the GATT system is nowhere more evident than in trade relations between developed and developing countries. 'Here an undeclared trade war is in progress.'⁷ The European Community specifically discriminates against the three principal Third World exports – metals, agricultural products and textiles.

⁵ K. Watkins, *The Oxfam Poverty Report* (Oxfam, 1995).

⁶ *Our Common Future* (OUP, 1987), page 71.

⁷ G. and V. Curzon, cited in H. Singer and J. Ansari, *Rich and Poor Countries*, 4th edn (Unwin Hyman, 1988), page 74.

The multi-fibre agreement, which aimed to protect the textile industries of the North against cheap imports from the South, has so far resisted all attempts to change it. The verdict of Belinda Coote, writing for Oxfam, is sombre:

The GATT is often accused of being a club that regulates world trade to suit the interests of its most powerful members, particularly those of the USA and the EC [now EU] ... The evidence to support these criticisms is overwhelming.⁸

Second, there is an obvious inequity between the commodity exports of the Third World and the manufactured goods of the First World. Demand for basic commodities grows only slowly and competition increases; they are sold on the market whereas tractors and turbines are sold on a cost-plus basis.⁹ The introduction of artificial substitutes, sometimes prompted by a hike in Third World commodity prices – corn syrup for sugar, synthetics instead of cotton, plastics instead of timber – in turn affects the prices of raw materials. This means that each year there is a huge ‘poor man’s gift’ to the rich through low commodity prices.

Third, there is the question of the role of transnational corporations, which now control between a quarter and a third of total world output and which account for 30 per cent of all world trade within themselves. It is often maintained that they benefit poorer countries by contributing to development, but, as the economists Singer and Ansari point out:

A development process that is being sustained by organizations interested primarily in profit maximization is organically different from a development process in which the public sector sets the pace. The direct effect of the multinationals’ investment is largely confined to the employment of a small, elite, semi-skilled and highly skilled labour force, the members of which earn incomes that are substantially higher than the incomes of the domestic labour class.¹⁰

Bhopal was a clear example of a case where the global reach of multinationals may be detrimental to the interests of the people of the South. So called ‘Free Trade zones’, of which there are now more than eighty operating in thirty countries, offer transnationals cheap non-union labour kept in check by harsh anti-strike legislation, a range of subsidies, and unrestricted repatriation of profits.

Investment by transnationals often diverts finance and energy away from the rural areas where most people live. Where it does not, however, as in the ‘agribusiness’ of the ‘Green Revolution’, the effects can be disastrous. The introduction of soya bean cultivation in Brazil, for example, has downgraded the quality of the local diet by occupying formerly food-producing land and causing prices to rise. The introduction

⁸ B. Coote, *The Trade Trap* (Oxfam, 1992), page 120.

⁹ C. Elliott, *Comfortable Compassion* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1987), referring to work by R. Prebisch and H. Singer.

¹⁰ Singer and Ansari, *Rich and Poor Countries*, page 251.

of cash crops throughout sub-Saharan Africa has taken the most fertile land away from direct food production. 'In this way, they not only exploit the food crisis, but are significantly responsible for it in the first place.'¹¹ The high-technology export-crop model of agribusiness increases hunger because

Scarce land, credit, water and technology are pre-empted for the export market. Most hungry people are not affected by the market at all ... The profits flow to corporations that have no interest in feeding hungry people without money.¹²

Related to these problems is the question of debt, recently highlighted by Christian Aid. The present debt crisis of Third World countries began when OPEC countries deposited their new oil wealth in Western banks. Since idle money loses against inflation, the banks needed to find countries to take loans. At first, interest rates were low or even negative, but they leapt in the 1980s when the United States pushed up world interest rates as a response to trade and budget deficits. The World Commission report already mentioned notes that 'major changes in international conditions' made debts contracted in the early 1970s unsustainable and real wages have fallen and unemployment risen, with growing poverty and deteriorating environmental conditions throughout the South. The effects of Southern debt have been described as 'financial low-intensity conflict'. A Brazilian labour leader speaking in 1985 described this in these terms:

Without being radical or overly bold, I will tell you that the Third World War has already started – a silent war, not for that reason any the less sinister. This war is tearing down Brazil, Latin America and practically all the Third World. Instead of soldiers dying there are children, instead of millions of wounded there are millions of unemployed; instead of destruction of bridges there is the tearing down of factories, schools, hospitals and entire economies ... a war by the United States against the Latin American continent and the Third World. It is a war over the foreign debt, one which has as its main weapon interest, a weapon more deadly than the atom bomb.¹³

The structural adjustment programmes imposed by the World Bank are designed to generate wealth which will then trickle down from rich to poor. However, far from wealth trickling down to the poorest the living standards of the rich and poor are diverging more and more widely. Where, in 1960, the richest fifth of the world's population had incomes thirty times greater than the poorest fifth they now receive sixty times more. 'If poverty were an infectious disease,' *The Oxfam Poverty Report comments,*

¹¹ F. Gaffikin and A. Nickson, *Jobs Crisis and the Multinationals* (Birmingham Trade Union Group Publications, no date), page 49.

¹² R..J. Barnet, *The Lean Years* (Abacus, 1981), page 171.

¹³ Cited in S. George, *A Fate Worse than Debt* (Penguin, 1988), page 234.

‘which could be caught by the rich as well as the poor, it would have been eradicated long ago. Political will and financial resources would have been found in abundance, just as they were to develop instruments of mass destruction during the Cold War. Yet governments, north and south, have been willing to tolerate and acquiesce in the steady marginalisation of the poor.’¹⁴

Christianity is about alternatives: ‘It shall not be so amongst you.’ When the president of the eucharist takes the bread and breaks it, she offers an image of God’s creation given to be shared equally amongst all of God’s people. ‘Blessed are you, Lord of the Universe’, we say, referring to the whole of creation. The Kentucky farmer-philosopher Wendell Berry speaks of the whole world system as ‘The Great Economy’, a whole within which there is ceaseless exchange. He points out that the world economy of GATT, the G7 summit and the world stock markets are only a tiny part of that. Its hubris is that it believes itself to be the whole and it exists by pillage of the great economy.¹⁵

Taking up this image, Ched Myers draws our attention to those sayings in Mark which focus on the impossibility of the rich entering the kingdom (10.23–5). Why? Because the kingdom is that situation where there *are no rich and poor*. The rich, therefore, whilst they are still rich, cannot enter, by definition. The rich man who comes to Jesus is told to redistribute all his wealth. Myers goes on:

Redistributive justice is high heresy in capitalism. But in the narrative of biblical radicalism, economic justice is the fundamental social goal of the people of God. The ancient vision of the Jubilee year ... was periodically to deconstruct debt, land alienation, and bond servitude – the three stages of impoverishment resulting from indebtedness ... We who have been socialized within the womb of capitalism dismiss such notions as utopian. True and universal economic justice, if it is contemplated at all, is done so as an eschatological hope; a noble ideal, but impossible to realize. But this attitude is precisely what is at issue in the conclusion to [the story of the rich man]. What is altogether impossible within our historical constructions is altogether possible within the reconstructive purview of God. Mark now argues that the hundredfold harvest promised in Jesus’ sower parable was not a pipe dream of indebted peasants but the concrete result of redistributive practice by the disciples (10.28). Surplus is created when the entitlements of household (basic productive economic unit), family (patrimonial inheritance) and land (basic unit of wealth) are ‘left’, i.e. restructured as community assets.¹⁶

Such a restructuring will involve, as this story in Mark indicates, and as Jesus repeatedly emphasized, the disbelief of the worldly wise and what he called ‘moving mountains’. In our world it involves no less than taking on the capitalist system, as the

¹⁴ Watkins, *The Oxfam Poverty Report*, page 3.

¹⁵ W. Berry, *Home Economics* (San Francisco, Northpoint Press, 1987), pages 56–64.

¹⁶ C. Myers, *Who Will Roll Away the Stone?* (New York, Orbis, 1994), pages 166–7.

philosopher Kai Nielsen, a sturdy opponent of theism, has pointed out. Capitalism, he argues, requires, and indeed can accept, at most a somewhat improved and more efficient version of the present and that, in turn, requires great injustice and inhumanity. He goes on: 'If we are morally serious and not ideologically bunkered, we will realize that it is our central social task to get rid of capitalism.'¹⁷ In this, surely, we have to agree with him. At the beginning of the sixteenth century Bartolomé de las Casas already saw the connection between a situation of exploited labour and the eucharist. A former slave owner, he was ordained and prepared to celebrate the eucharist. He found this passage set for the reading:

If one sacrifices ill-gotten goods, the offering is blemished;
 the gifts of the lawless are not acceptable.
 The Most High is not pleased with the offerings of the ungodly,
 nor for a multitude of sacrifices does he forgive sins.
 Like one who kills a son before his father's eyes
 is the person who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor.
 The bread of the needy is the life of the poor;
 whoever deprives them of it is a murderer.
 To take away a neighbour's living is to commit murder;
 to deprive an employee of wages is to shed blood.

(Sirach 34.21–7)

Hearing this stopped las Casas in his tracks. He abandoned the eucharist to return to Spain to get a charter for the Indians. He realised that the bread of the eucharist signifies not just the good earth but also the human product, the fruit of exploited labour. Bread which is taken from the poor cannot be the bread of life, but is the bread of death. If we in the North are offering the fruit of the life of the poor at our eucharist we become like one who 'kills a son before his father's eyes'. Such an offering cannot be acceptable to the God and Father of Jesus Christ. It is only acceptable to the Moloch who loves to feast on human blood, and who demands human sacrifice. In that case our worship is not eucharist but idolatry, worship of Mammon.

The problem is that, since we are willy-nilly caught up in structures of injustice, how is it possible to celebrate the eucharist? Should we be like the Colombian priest Camilo Torres who refused to celebrate the eucharist until justice had been achieved? Many may feel like that. Las Casas offers another alternative. He committed his life to a struggle for the Indians. Is that not what sharing the eucharistic bread calls us to? We take bread and wine, the product of labour. We remember that these products represent the 'life' of those who made them, their time and creativity. We remember especially that, in the words of Ben Sirach, they are 'the life of the poor'. We remember that the Church is a worldwide body, with people 'from every nation', and that this 'one body' is split between haves and have nots, just as it was at Corinth. We

¹⁷ K. Nielsen, 'Global Justice, Capitalism and the Third World' in R. Attfield and B. Wilkins, eds., *International Justice and the Third World* (Routledge, 1992), page 33.

remember what Paul said to that situation: that it involves us 'putting to shame those who have nothing'. In this remembering we celebrate with integrity, drawing our inspiration to work for change from our feeding on the bread of life.

But is a different economic world really possible or, as we are repeatedly told by 'realists' – is there no alternative? The answer to this is that there is of course an alternative where there is the political will to realize it. This would involve, in the first place, a whole series of democratic regulatory bodies, as proposed by the 1992 UN Development Programme.¹⁸ The present World Bank could be replaced by a global central bank with the task of creating a common currency, maintaining price and exchange-rate stability, providing for a global adjustment of surpluses and deficits and for equal access to international loans. This was already suggested by Keynes in 1944 but rejected by the US. GATT could be replaced by an international trade organization to ensure free and equal access to all forms of global trade and manage commodity stabilization schemes. Instead of the present system of loans, development could be financed by a system of progressive income tax to be collected automatically from the rich nations and to be distributed to the poor nations according to their income and development needs. Finally we need the establishment of a new Development Security Council which could establish a broad policy framework for all global development issues, from food security to ecological security, and an International Court of Economic Justice responsible for the management of those resources on which we all depend. Urgent areas would be fish, water, and forests.

Not only are these policies, not pipe dreams – they are actually urgent and practical recommendations for the survival of the planet. If these considerations are not at the heart of our eucharist then we do indeed celebrate in vain. 'I hate, I despise your festivals' said YHWH to the rich who lived in the lap of luxury whilst the poor starved (Amos 5.21). Those of us who live in the equivalent of houses of cedar must be careful we do not incur the same condemnation. Properly celebrated, the eucharist is a challenge to construct what the World Council of Churches has spoken of as a just, participatory and sustainable world order in which the poor are no longer fed with crumbs from the rich man's table. It is oriented essentially towards this future as it celebrates not only the God who is the source of our hope, but the God who in Godself hopes and hopes in us.

¹⁸ For the following points see U. Duchrow, *Alternatives to Global Capitalism, Drawn from Biblical History, Designed for Political Action* (The Hague, International Books, 1995).