

## The Earthly City

“As recession bites, it’s vital the Church lifts our spirits” – so wrote a newspaper columnist recently.<sup>1</sup> I’ve read the article several times and I’m still not entirely sure what he was expecting the Church to do; he may even have been asking what the recession could do for the Church. “It’s not just insolvency experts who should be doing well out of this recession,” he wrote, “The Church in Britain – in all its varying forms – has a great opportunity to get more customers through its doors. The good news for people who try God for the first time during the economic slump...is that it won’t cost them anything, and it may even make them richer. That’s the message that everyone from archbishops to the humblest parish priest should be shouting from the rooftops.”

That last sentence is a given at all times: evangelisation - spreading the gospel, living the gospel - should be a constant priority for the Church (the institution) and for the church (its members). The current state of the economy doesn’t suddenly make evangelisation more of a priority. It may cause some to focus more on real values, but I suspect it will be those who are already familiar with the gospel message anyway rather than the un-churched. Why, after all, would going to church suddenly become attractive to people who have hardly given God a second thought? Someone doesn’t suddenly become a believer just because the bottom has fallen out of their stock portfolio unless, of course, it’s accompanied by an almost Pauline conversion experience, causing them to switch investments from this life to eternal life!

I actually don’t think this is what the columnist was suggesting. He seemed to be saying that the Church should involve itself more in areas of social justice, speaking out for the victims of the credit crunch, even offering practical (as well as pastoral) support in the hope that, as a result of raising its profile in this way, people might want to find out more. While that might be possible to some extent, I don’t think it quite addresses his initial statement that as recession bites, it is vital the Church lifts people’s spirits. Is it possible, therefore, for some spiritual good come out of our economic woes and, if so, how?

We would have to say, as believers, that when all else fails, God never does. Our faith doesn’t get rid of the practical material difficulties with which we may be struggling, but might it be possible for us to bear witness to the fact that there is something there, something within us, that helps us to cope? Might others then want to find out what our secret is? (It isn’t actually a secret and shouldn’t be; it should be there for all to see all the time.)

Let’s take as a starting point this familiar passage from St Matthew’s gospel:

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Edwards, *Yorkshire Post*, 4 April 2009

*That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and how you are to clothe it. Surely life means more than food, and the body more than clothing! Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they are? Can any of you, for all his worrying, add one single cubit to his span of life?... So do not worry; do not say, "What are we to eat? What are we to drink? How are we to be clothed? It is the pagans who set their hearts on all these things. Your heavenly Father knows you need them all. Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on his righteousness, and all these other things will be given you as well. [Mt 6 v 25-34]*

Jesus isn't saying that we don't need to do *anything* because God will take care of *everything* (though he does). Rather, what he is saying is reflected in a Lenten petition from the Prayer of the Church: "Help us to work to build the earthly city, but never let us lose sight of your heavenly kingdom." From a practical and realistic point of view we obviously have to deal with the world because we live *in* the world, but we should never lose sight of God's kingdom or the place that God (and the things of God) should have in our lives. Our faith doesn't make the problems of life go away, but it does help us to deal with them in a different way to many of the people around us: we deal with them with God. "With God on our side, who can be against us?" [Rm 8 v 31] Our faith and trust in God gives us a solid place to work from and a different perspective. When society's values are crumbling, we trust in the ultimate value: the surety of our relationship with God in Christ. Our problems don't necessarily go away, but there is hope and so we deal with them with hope. Perhaps that is the way in which - and the message by which - the Church can lift people's spirits.

In its pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council spent a hundred pages (ninety-three paragraphs) discussing the place, the mission, and the ministry of "The Church in the Modern World". The preface begins: "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well...for theirs is a community who, united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onwards towards the kingdom of the Father and are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all." And the Introduction begins: "At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, she should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other." "The Church believes that Christ who died and was raised for the sake of all, can show us the way and strengthen us through the Spirit in order to

be worthy of our destiny. She also maintains that beneath all that changes, there is much that is unchanging, much that has its ultimate foundation in Christ, who is the same yesterday, and today, and forever.” [para 10]

**T**he financial crisis that we have experienced came as a seismic shock. Institutions and corporations that we took to be rock-solid (ironically one of the first was Northern Rock!) crumbled and we were left wondering where and when the damage might end. So many people, following financial advice that was previously taken to be sound, discovered too late that they had built on sand. Could anything be trustworthy anymore? To repeat: “The Church maintains that beneath all that changes, there is much that is unchanging, much that has its ultimate foundation in Christ, who is the same yesterday, and today, and forever.”

**O**f course there is nothing wrong with investing our money, trying to provide in a responsible way for our future security and well-being. The problem was that many of the financial institutions in which so many placed so much trust (and money) were being run by individuals motivated by personal greed, feathering their nests at our expense. They proved what St Paul says in his first letter to Timothy, not (as is often misquoted) that money is the root of all evil, but that *love* of money is.

**M**oney can become a god with people, but it is a fragile empty “theology”. When it disappears, then what? What is left? “Better to have little and with it fear of the Lord than to have treasure and with it anxiety.” [Pr 15 v 16] With the exception of those living under a vow of poverty, we are not called to renounce money but, as we said earlier, we have to make sure that it doesn’t get in the way of our relationship with God. If it disappears then, in a spiritual sense, it shouldn’t make any *real* difference because nothing of our relationship with God will have changed, the ultimate foundation of our life won’t have changed. In case we need reminding: “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” [Mt 4 v 4] and “Heaven and earth will pass away, but (God’s) words will never pass away” [Mt 24 v 35].

**T**he atheist or the cynic might say, “Faith doesn’t pay the bills”, but I’m not so sure that’s true. It can be amazing just how often when we give to God, God gives back to us – at least enough but sometimes more than enough, “a full measure, pressed down and flowing over” [Lk 6 v 38]. And consider this: after all the years in which you have given to the Church and your parish, if you suddenly find yourself in dire straits might the Church and your parish be able to help you were you to ask?<sup>2</sup> Might God be asking you to ask? It’s certainly

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<sup>2</sup> (perhaps with the week’s food shopping or the gas or electricity bill)

worth praying about. This may well be another and very practical way, in which - as that columnist wrote - the Church may be able to lift people's spirits.

Let's return to that quote from *Gaudium et Spes*: "The Church maintains that beneath all that changes, there is much that is unchanging, much that has its ultimate foundation in Christ, who is the same yesterday, and today, and forever." The Church (the institution) obviously can't offer financial and material security – that's not what she is about. But it is our commission from our baptism for the church (its members) to go out into the "market place" and show by word and action the sure thing (the certainty of our faith and our following of Christ) in which we have invested our lives and which promises interest that is, quite literally, out of this world.

Is that going to instantly attract financiers, stockbrokers, and bank managers? Probably not, but that's not the point – at least not directly. The point is to be able to bear witness in our lives to the fact that there is something (literally vitally) important to us that has nothing to do with material and financial gain, something we can fall back on – not as a last resort, but as a first principle. Yes we care about our personal finances, the cost of living, and having a roof over our head, and so the recession can't help but concern us. However they do not exclusively define who we are and what our life is all about. And so, while certain of those so-called securities may currently be crumbling, our faith and our hope remain unchanged (not necessarily unchallenged, but unchanged) and it's in sharing this truth with others that we may indeed be able to lift their spirits and we ourselves may even feel a little better into the bargain!

*Preserve me, God, I take refuge in you.  
I say to the Lord: "You are my God.  
My happiness lies in your alone.  
I keep the Lord ever in my sight:  
since he is at my right hand, I shall stand firm.  
You will show me the path of life,  
the fullness of joy in your presence,  
at your right hand happiness for ever.<sup>3</sup>*

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Fr Neil McNicholas

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<sup>3</sup> from Ps 15(16)