

Sunday, April 24th, 2016, Fifth Sunday in Easter

Readings: Acts 11:1-18, Psalm 148, Revelation 21:1-6, John 13:31-35

An Easter Economics?

Introduction

What does an Easter world, a resurrected world look like? That is what we have been exploring these past couple of weeks: First we heard about the Easter individual and second we heard about an Easter society. Today, I ask another question: one that you may never have considered: what does an Easter economics look like? Wow: what in God's name does economics have to do with Easter – aren't they polar opposites? It all sounds a bit like an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, a hopeless confusion of faith and hard core reality. But is that really true? If we believe that Jesus' resurrection has meaning for public life as much as personal life; for life *before* death as much as life *after* death; then resurrection has meaning for everything as a power for life *over* death. Resurrection is all about life prevailing.

So, let us put the question again but in a different way: what is there about economics – that may be life giving? Don't get scared! You don't have to be an economist to think this through; in fact, it may help not to be since economists actually tend to delude themselves, believing that economics is value-free, that economics has nothing to do with a social vision or *the good* as the Greeks put it. But the reality is the opposite: economics is a crucial component in the shaping of our world: it is a power in its own right; it has in a sense the power of life or death over us depending on what is done with and through it.

The Holy Grail: King Arthur and Dennis the Serf – Power

Let's begin from our clip from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* with the words had between King Arthur and Dennis the serf (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAaWvVFERVA>). The conflict is about power, about the powers in the public dimension of life: political, social and economic. King Arthur, not unsurprisingly, sees power in idealistic terms, mystical terms, in a quasi-religious way: power has been ceded him and only him by the Lady of the Lake. Dennis, the object of power, and often its victim, sees power in a thoroughly more earthy and modern way. Arthur sees power as his unique domain, something *exclusive* of others. Dennis sees it as something to be exercised by all for all; power is to be *inclusive* of all...although given his obsessive personality you would wonder for how long.

The Readings: Acts and John

Now with this broad insight about power and the powers in public life as a *means to inclusivity*, let's look at the readings for today: for in them there is testimony to the emerging importance of inclusivity in the thinking and living of the early Christian church.

In Acts we find the dawning of a revelation upon the apostle Peter. As a Hebrew of the time he lived according to the Jewish purity system – remember last week – a system structured on the backs of the impure, the unclean; a system that ritually, socially and economically targeted certain groups of people as victims, outsiders, as scapegoats. Peter's vision that God's goodwill, God's generosity, God's grace through Jesus is not the possession of any particular group, leads to an extraordinarily

radical conclusion: that living through the power of Christ is to live inclusively of all people. Christ spells the end to purity systems of exclusion. Through the power of Christ, power, the powers in society: social, religious, political and economic, are to be harnessed and applied inclusively of all.

In John, that famous reading about a New Commandment, speaks similarly: within it there is the same insight, the same passion for the embracing, the inclusion of the other, of the one who is different, outside, beyond. John's plea to his community that is so divided, so atomized into rival theological camps; is simply love one another, live out the power of inclusion. But what is even more stunning about this reading is that just prior to the command lies the story of Judas' betrayal of Jesus. The implicit plea then is this: embrace, include even the ultimate outsider, the ultimate enemy, the one who you despise most; embrace, include even Judas and those like him. I have often wondered whether anyone rushed out to try to bring Judas back, to talk him out of his shame, his despair, his rapidly deepening hell. I imagine not. And to this day in the Christian story, Judas remains the outsider, beyond grace.

To Economics

If inclusivity is fundamental to the Christian way of seeing and living reality, what is the purpose of economics as one of the great powers in society, in the world? The answer is self-evident in the light of what we have already said: economics' purpose in the world is to inclusively serve all human beings and the environment in which we live. Let us be absolutely clear: from a biblical and theological perspective, economics and economic activity are not ends in themselves accountable only to themselves. Economics and economic activity are bound to the greatest end of all - being a means to life for *all* people...not just some, for the planet as a whole, not just bits of it. Let me finish with two observations: one from experience, the other from discernment.

First, as an under-graduate student in economics at the University of NSW, I was lucky enough to have a wonderful tutor, who later became a senior bureaucrat in the NSW government: his name was Paul. One day over a cup of coffee he made a comment which I have never forgotten. He said: "Geoff, when you write essays you write as if economics and ethics are connected...not many economists would share your view". Perhaps Paul was gently indicating to me that my future in the world of economics would not be altogether fruitful. He swore black and blue that that was not his intention. Happily, since that conversation, as inequality has dramatically increased within and between societies, that has changed – people such as the American, Paul Stiglitz, the Frenchman, Thomas Piketty, and the Brit, Anthony Atkinson – have all raised their voices about the way economics needs to reconnect with the ethical challenges of our time: in other words that economics is not beholden only to itself.

Second, increasingly market-economics has become a sort of unquestioned dogma an unchallenged fundamentalism in the West. As a dogma it has been decoupled from reality. The classical economists such as Adam Smith or even Karl Marx for that matter, know that there is nothing absolute about the laws of the market...after all they are only distillations of human behaviour that change from context to context, from decade to decade. The great British economist John Maynard Keynes was only too aware of this as he battled to develop an economic theory to lift the West out of economic depression in the early twentieth century, in part generated by unimaginative economists in conjunction with naïve politicians. He wrote of them as "madmen in authority who hear voices in the air".

Economics is a power in our world. Economics has accountability beyond itself as a means to a resurrected world, to life for all. It must be an inclusive thing. Dennis, the peasant, was right. In that

light the recent words of Pope Francis I are worth chewing on... “I ask you to ensure that humanity is served by wealth, not ruled by it.”