

God's Indelible Imprint

Thumbs up for global change!



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The theme “just living” provokes a number of possible interpretations; some relate to our physical context, some to the “times we live in”, still others to our status in life.

When considering contemporary times, the pursuit of justice-based living has been brought into sharp focus by the current banking crisis resulting from the credit crunch. If we ever thought that high-flying bankers lived in ivory towers, inaccessible and remote, then the banking crisis dispels the myth that they are detached and we are unaffected. We are now feeling the full force of maverick greed-inducing pragmatism, laced with an intoxicating mixture of dangerous “hedging” and “betting”. The pawns are us, ordinary men and women affected by their decisions to greater or lesser extents.

This short article is not intended to provide a rigorous academic critique (that I leave to our other contributors), but to challenge and provoke us to consider God's fingerprints on this planet, so evident around us, but suffering from the smudges and stains of our crass arrogance. To that end I offer my disclaimer that this article *might* jeopardise the stability of our comfort zones!

Environmental issues, of course, are inextricably linked to this backdrop of economic fall-out. At the recent John Ray Initiative (JRI)¹/Redcliffe College Environment Conference² in January, Dr Andrew Steer³ portrayed a hope-fuelled scenario. He reminded us that we have much to be thankful for... millions raised out of poverty, huge progress achieved in tackling illiteracy, not to mention the empowering of women into affirming and meaningful employment, and improved welfare for their children.

There *are* signs of encouraging progress which we do well to look for in these times. However, for every piece of positive news there is, the daily BBC round-up unerringly, and without fail, reminds us of the bad news.

I was struck when listening to Dr Martin Hodson⁴ at the “Hope for Planet Earth” seminar in Cheltenham in early March, that the rate of ice melt in the Arctic region continues unabated; most disturbingly the acceleration seems to have taken the experts by surprise too.⁵

As I compile these thoughts, I am gazing out of the window of the train on my way up to Manchester to visit some Peruvian missionaries. The sun is shining and the world seems to be a good place; the landscape is greening in the first flushes of spring, sheep are grazing with little apparent concern or anxiety, and humanity is busily and purposefully going about its daily business. It reminds me of the old British Rail advert smooching along to Louis Armstrong's “what a wonderful world” serenade.

¹ For further information about JRI's work, see <http://www.jri.org.uk>

² Further information about the Environment Conference may be found on Redcliffe's website; see <http://www.redcliffe.org/standard.asp?id=5560&cachefixer=cf75734878187161>

³ Dr Andrew Steer is Director General of Policy and Research at the UK Department for International Development (DFID) (<http://www.dfid.gov.uk>)

⁴ Dr Martin Hodson is an environmental biologist at Oxford Brookes University and an active member of Sage, Oxford's Christian environmental group (<http://www.sageoxford.org.uk>)

⁵ I refer to Dr Martin Hodson's comments concerning Sir John Houghton's revised estimate that the summer ice could disappear entirely from the Arctic region by the 2020s and not the 2080s as he had opined just a year earlier. See the following BBC articles for further information:- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7139797.stm> dated 12th December 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7692963.stm> dated 28th October 2008

I feel the need to jolt myself back into reality lest I am sucked into that same unreality that pervades the mindset of the bankers gambling with our lives, dumping huge multi-billion corporations, discarded (now that they no longer respond to their games) into the hands of a Government “entrusted” with picking up the shattered pieces. The ex-bankers presumably have now moved on to indulge in “planning” how they can possibly spend their £16 million pension funds.⁶ They are “just living”, just living to enjoy themselves at the expense of the many. As I listen to public sentiment it is no wonder we hear people cry, “it’s not fair.”

On the *Greening of Mission* module currently being delivered to the MA students at Redcliffe, we were reminded just last week that when planet earth was first viewed from space in the late 1960s, political divisions, warfare, suffering and death could not be seen.⁷

Any alien approaching the planet from 200,000 miles away would be forgiven for thinking that the serenity of this blue sphere hanging in space would make an ideal holiday destination for stressed-out extraterrestrials. It promises lazy beaches filled with palm trees swaying in the gentle breeze. No signs of the pain of displacement of the millions of political and environmental refugees, homes destroyed through political, ideological or religious bickering or hospitals and morgues filled with the victims of war are evident from that distance. Some of these victims are only “just living”, if we can call their existence “living” in any true sense of the word.

So what’s going on? Let’s zoom back in to earth for a moment. Dr Andrew Steer left us with the challenge that “green/clean” technology allied to political will could yet be the saviour of the planet. Investment on a massive scale is still required and to that extent the implications of the recession were depicted as being a negative spanner in the well-oiled works of Government.

Will Alistair yet become the “darling” of the people, and find an enlightened path through the gloom? Yes, we should praise God for the many wonderful things His “very good creation” has achieved, yet the cynics amongst us are left wondering whether the “progress” so championed by, for example, the Victorian Empire, needs a serious reality check in the early years of the 21st Century.

Can progress really carry on, seemingly unchecked and without limit? Will this current crisis lead to significant and lasting reform, spawning a more humane and socially-responsible form of capitalism?⁸ That would be my sincere hope.

But so long as economic profit remains the “bottom line”,⁹ our hopes for a “global development project”, which is genuinely kind to the environment and to the majority of the non-western world (which probably doesn’t think the world is so “green and pleasant”) may remain just “pie in the sky”. Never mind the fact that most non-westerners do not have the means, or the inclination,¹⁰ to admire the green *vista* from the train (that great testament to Victorian progress) as the verdant hills and rolling plains flash past. What kind of

⁶ With reference to The Royal Bank of Scotland’s ex-chief executive, Sir Fred Goodwin, as reported in the recent BBC article dated 3rd March 2009, (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7921778.stm>)

⁷ With reference to Sachs, W., *Planet Dialectics: Explorations in Environment and Development*, London: Zed Books Ltd., 1999, pp.129-131, 149-155

⁸ A number of experts are exploring new forms of capitalism. The classical capitalist model’s vulnerability to economic excesses has been significantly discredited in recent years, not least in the context of the present-day credit crunch. See for example the concept of ‘natural capitalism’ by Amory Lovins, where human and natural values are properly considered within the context of business strategy, (<http://www.globalissues.org/video/732/amory-lovins-natural-capitalism#Summary>)

⁹ A company only exists legally if it has been formed for the principal purpose of making profit. We know that profit is not inherently bad (assuming it has been gained fairly, and is then utilised in a proper manner). The trouble comes when reality so often evidences the opposite, so maybe a fundamental rethink in this area is needed...and urgently!

¹⁰ They are too busy trying to survive today to worry about tomorrow

development do we need to consider now, when the numbers of abjectly poor continue to rise and when inequality appears to be growing on an exponential scale?¹¹ How can we possibly pat our backs, in such circumstances, and claim that our work has been “good”?

If you think I am being harsh, maybe I am, but then again, I don't think we have long to pontificate, smile sweetly and imagine what we will do with our future retirements. Dr Martin Hodson, in the talk mentioned above, graphically sketched out the statistical data which suggests that current levels of carbon emissions are rapidly approaching dangerous and unprecedented levels. We have seven years in which to reverse this trend and if we do not see a significant reversal immediately after 2016 then we are in big trouble.

The world beyond the West is suffering in large part the excesses of our wasteful and luxurious lives... we all need to hold up our hands and admit that we are implicated in this gross injustice. Nehemiah's prayer on behalf of his people comes to mind.¹² He pleaded with God for the forgiveness of his sins and those of his fathers. Dare we hope that our children and grandchildren will take similar action to exonerate us, after the legacy we are likely to leave them? Do our hands bear the evidence of the black ink that our own fingerprints have uniquely left for posterity in the criminal records of the cosmic database?

You see, we are often “just living” without due care and attention for others. We have not signed-up for justice-living, which *really* costs us. So what do we do about it? Leaving aside the obvious spiritual engagement, may I firstly suggest, education; secondly, compassion.¹³ Let's take the first one initially, and to that end I refer you to Dr Dewi Hughes'¹⁴ two articles above.

Dewi reminded us that God's blueprint for equitable and fair “human to human” and apposite “human to God” relations are illustrated in the Jubilee principles laid out in Leviticus 25, and elsewhere in Scripture.¹⁵ Whether or not this ethical “code” was ever implemented has more to say about human beings and our tendency to wander into “blind-alleyways” and protect the *status quo* when it suits us, rather than cast any doubt on God's original and faultless designs.

Now the challenge is to consider to what extent these principles can be copied and pasted into contemporary living. Jesus encouraged a “third way approach” to healthy living, for those hungry enough to listen on the mountainside then,¹⁶ as much as to those of us today.

The early church seemed to have grasped the spirit of this message too, even if we tend to apply rose-tinted spectacles to the Acts passages¹⁷ and gloss over the real tensions that these issues surely created for many early Christians. However, God's blueprint is unequivocal, and therein lays the clue if we have the “eyes to see and the ears to listen”.

I appreciated Peter Price-Thomas'¹⁸ practical description of God's handiwork evident in His creation, if we are prepared, that is, for God's revelation to remove the scales from our eyes so often obliterating the view.

¹¹ Nearly a billion of the world's population lives on less than a dollar a day (see <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>). See also Tearfund's website, <http://www.tearfund.org> and the Worldmapper chart at <http://www.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=179> for a graphic portrayal of global poverty. It's not too late to join the carbon fast!

¹² Nehemiah 1:4-10

¹³ This word does not mean “feeling sorry,” but being “moved to act”. Jesus is our greatest model for observing this type of response

¹⁴ Dr Dewi Hughes is Tearfund's Theological Advisor

¹⁵ For example, the stern rebuke in Isaiah 58 and throughout the book of Amos

¹⁶ See the Beatitudes in Matthew, chapter 5

¹⁷ Acts 2:42-47, Acts 4:32-37. See the story of Ananias and Sapphira in the following chapter 5 of Acts

¹⁸ Peter Price-Thomas is the founder of Eco-church (<http://www.ecochurch.org.uk>), which seeks to help Christians see sustainable development as an extension of their faith. Formerly he was with The Natural Step

Dealing with the causes, not the effects, must always be wise advice when considering our priorities for long-term change; “*upstream*”, rather than “downstream” is clearly the operative word. It takes courage and vision to see where we are heading, and like Noah, Moses, Abraham, etc. the outworking of our faith, amidst the ridicule heaped on those obedient to God’s voice, has been, and always will be, the challenge that sets apart Christ’s true church.

Seeing the wonder of the spider’s web captured so simply and profoundly in a children’s story¹⁹ prompts us that like children we must become if we are to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. This is not to debate the meaning behind Jesus’ rebuke to the disciples,²⁰ but to remember that the “yes” to faith by a child must not be underestimated or squashed by the “wisdom” of elder years. Of course, age brings maturity and experience, but it does depend what we have been feeding ourselves on during the intervening years.

To my own shame, not so very long ago, I approached many environmental issues with some degree of disdain and suspicion. Whilst not exactly a die-hard materialistic consumer, I bought into the lie that progress meant using up more and more “green and pleasant land” for the “greater good” of building more and more “concrete jungles”, namely, the “impressive urbanisation project”.

My problem was that I had acquired, and regularly fed, an anthropocentric world-view. The image of the “eco-warriors” campaigning against nuclear disarmament at Mildenhall in the 1980s was not an enticing one for me during impressionable years. Yet, as every child soon discovers, every action has a consequence, I have also learnt that every act of consumption has an environmental consequence. “Carbon footprint” accountability so regularly reminds us that much of this consumption has negative consequences... we have unlearned how to live lightly, thinking we were learning to live better.

Time is almost up. No longer should we think, “which is the quickest and cheapest (cheapest to whom; us or nature?) way of getting from A to B?” Tearfund’s speaker so rightly reminded the audience in Cheltenham that we should think twice about that flight to Spain to top-up the tan; is there a *better* (in every sense of the word) way of travelling to Krakow or Warsaw (or wherever it was that Tearfund were meeting), than to opt for the ease and convenience of flying? They deemed yes; it was longer time-wise, and more expensive economically to take the train; but that meant more time to spend together in fellowship and presumably a little less money to be tempted by unnecessary gadgets.²¹

On re-reading the above, I sound like a real kill-joy! Well, I recognise that owning a car and a house (or at least part-owning with the building society, or is it now the Government (?)) puts me in a position of great global privilege; I know that full well, and maybe I should be a bit more of a kill-joy (at least towards myself), if it means I can better see the backdrop of poverty and environmental degradation that exists “out there”, and which highlights, rather uncomfortably, our differences! My time working in mission in Bolivia will leave many images seared on my conscience, which I hope God will never remove, for my own sake more than any other. Like the Old Testament prophets, when we encounter injustice we should be angry. I’ve come to the conclusion that apathy is obviously the *real* kill-joy!

I hope that the articles by Dr Dewi Hughes and Peter Price-Thomas not only challenge your thinking but prompt you into appropriate and considered action. My desire with every student

(<http://www.naturalstep.org>) and Forum For the Future (<http://www.forumforthefuture.org>), both leading sustainable development charities

¹⁹ If you haven’t seen the film, *Charlotte’s Web*, ditch the adult pride and let its wonder speak to you!

²⁰ Matthew 18:3

²¹ At the seminar in Cheltenham, Andy Frost, Director of Sharing Jesus International

(<http://www.sharejesusinternational.com>) explained the challenge of persuading young people that the environmental costs of upgrading mobile phones should outweigh the gains of ‘keeping up with the Jones’

who completes the Greening of Mission module here at Redcliffe is that they go back to their place of service, whether in the UK or elsewhere, just that little bit more enlightened.

Reminded of God's "good" creation, the reality of the mess we have made, and the responsibility originally entrusted to Adam to tend the earth and take care of it, some of these students may become powerful advocates for positive change in their contexts. This labour of love has never gone away and faces us more acutely than ever before. Many of the poor are victims of environmental catastrophe, or unfair trade practices or the arbitrariness of being born in a certain place at a certain time. If we believe in a God of justice, then, as His ambassadors, we had better get on with cleaning up our act, and fast!

Please join with me in praying that at Redcliffe we would re-discover God's "*greenprint*" for us as a College, such that we give credence and authenticity to the message we "preach" and that we grow in our conviction, understanding and influence as we steward the awesome responsibility of every human heart and mind that passes through our corridors each year.

Some doubters might think that green issues are irrelevant, or wacky or of little importance, but I grow daily in my conviction that God's justice is not for humanity only²² but for all of His creation. That is a sobering thought when annually hundreds of species are becoming extinct, at a pace of up to one thousand times the historical background rate.²³ And what's more, even if it were "just living" just for humans, research is increasingly uncovering the alarming impact of environmental degradation on us; poverty and sickness issues just cannot be divorced from environmental concerns, for the two exist in tandem.

Our pride might yet lead us to the scenario where we have extinguished ourselves through war or famine, and the aliens arriving for their winter holidays find a landscape barren and absent of humanity; maybe not unlike our own Martian findings. I don't think that's the scenario we would want to imagine, is it?

Have we been moved yet? Let's pause for a compassion-check.

I trust the above has provoked something within you. Our privilege is to engage with you through mutually stimulating and challenging thinking; for the sake of the lost, and the planet we love.

Please Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.

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²² See, for example, Romans 8:18-25

²³ See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/earth-faces-catastrophic-loss-of-species-408605.html>