

## The Gift of the Common Good

Jenny Sinclair

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The theme was “**Most Gracious Gift**” from the second reading that Sunday, Romans 5:12-19.*



Rublev's Icon of the Holy Trinity (Св. Троицы)

## Introduction

Thank you for such a warm welcome - it's really a privilege to be here with you.

I know we share similar concerns. We care about people, community and social transformation. We are motivated by our faith, and we feel called to build God's kingdom so that everyone can live life to the full.

Recent events have lifted the lid on longstanding inequality and exposed deep social fragmentation; which we know from our own towns and cities: now unambiguously clear for all to see.

So it's more important than ever for us now to recognise the special role that we – the people of the church – can play to build a social peace and to help our country work for the common good.

So over the next 40 minutes or so, we'll go back to our roots and look at how our tradition can inspire and resource us,

I'll tell you a bit about *Together for the Common Good*, working ecumenically and across traditions. I'll talk about the Common Good *as a practice*, linking with our vocation and our spirituality and how, through us, it can be a gift to our communities. We'll explore, and celebrate, different ways to foster the relationships necessary for a just and peaceful common life together. We'll find nourishment in the Trinity - I'm sure you know this beautiful 14<sup>th</sup> Century Russian icon by Rublev - it will be our backdrop.

### 1. Where are we now?

Let's take a minute to consider where we are now.

Let's be clear, whether you are for Remain or Leave, the conditions that have brought us to this point have been a long time in the making.

The Remain and Clinton campaigns were predicated on the same liberal economic and cultural terms that have been dominant for years across successive governments.

Those left behind were tired of being offered choices between being a few pounds worse or better off. What was benefitting the global establishment never reached their door.

They were suspicious of 'the truth' which never rang true *for them* while their infrastructure was in a state of degradation and the dignity that work can offer was fast becoming a memory.

They lost patience as social norms changed without their consent. They feel exiled in their own country.

So when a rare opportunity to be heard came up, they took it, even *if they knew* the campaigns were deeply flawed.

In hindsight these seismic democratic gestures seem an inevitable response, even if some are still trying to figure it out.

The pollsters and the media missed what was happening – because this 'basket of deplorables' had been *shamed* into hiding their views, inhibited from raising legitimate concerns - about the rapid pace of immigration, economic mismanagement and culture change. They were effectively silenced, excluded.

What we have seen so far is only the beginning of more geo political turbulence. We should be suspicious and cautious, and resist being swept along with the crowd.

## 2. The relationship of the Church with people who are poor

So now that the fragmented, unequal and divided reality is laid bare, how should we in the churches respond?

Well, perhaps before we go any further, we should look at the relationship of the Church with 'the poor.'

The Beatitudes teach that the poor in spirit are blessed. The Church does its best to honour this.

But let me tell you about Ann Marie, who I know through my friend Cathi. Ann Marie lives with her four children on a run-down estate. She used to spend most of her time in her flat watching tv, going out only to get the kids from school. She said she didn't have the confidence and there was nothing to do round where she lives.

She felt the church people in her area were more interested in campaigning about justice or helping refugees than in people like her right on their doorstep.

This is how Anne Marie experienced the Church.

Have we as Christians judged people? Ignored or dismissed certain people or favoured some groups over others?

Pope Francis is calling for a 'poor church' *for* the poor - and *of* the poor.

If our understanding of justice means speaking truth to power as a way of avoiding personal relationships with people who are excluded, then we might as well pack up and go home.

Policy changes can of course help to tackle inequality and poverty statistics but they *can't* fix poor relationships, isolation, lack of agency; and they can't fix the lack of meaning in people's lives.

Has our notion of justice come down to handing out bits of money?

*Faith in the City* published in 1985 said:

*"Poverty is not only about shortage of money. It is about relationships; about how people are treated and how they regard themselves; about powerlessness, exclusion and loss of dignity."*

At *parish level*, have we *personally* overlooked people like Anne Marie?

There may need to be an examination of conscience, perhaps even of the Church itself.

Can we ask the difficult question, if some of us in the Church have been swept along and, inadvertently perhaps, focused more on the needs and interests of the destitute or of refugees or migrants or other minority groups, and *overlooked the interests* of the struggling families in our own neighbourhoods?

In Pope Francis' theological tradition, sometimes called the Theology of the People, the term 'poor' refers to people who live with the experience of *non-power*. This can be economic but also social, material, relational, educational, spiritual.

Ignoring the interests of other human beings in our own society is to exclude the possibility of what they have to contribute.

Someone who is living with the experience of non-power has a sense of their need for other human beings. The awareness of needing others, the yearning for love and belonging. The *opposite of individualism*. That is a very profound truth and a beautiful thing, which is why Francis says the church must be not only *for* the poor, but *of* the poor.

And when we are estranged from those who experience non-power, we are impoverished, less human.

Our common life together, our democracy, has been weakened.

But Pope Francis says if the Holy Spirit is set free among the poor, this is how the Church *itself* will be transformed.

So at this critical time, how true are the churches being to that call?

### **3. The mystery of the Trinity**

Let's look for a moment at the icon.

The mystery of the Trinity.

Let's consider the relational model that underpins our faith.

On one level we see three angels seated under Abraham's tree.

On another it's a visual expression of the nature of God: where every living person is called into a great creative participation with him.

From left to right, we see: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

There's a space for us at this table.

We're invited to complete the movements of God in the world by our own response.

It's being part of this relationship that makes us fully human.

Our mission, or our 'hidden journey', begins here, with the interior life of Jesus.

It's *our job* to show how humanity can recover a proper view of the human person.

As Pope Benedict said in *Caritas in Veritate*:

*"As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. It's not by isolation that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God."*

The thing is, it's more about relationships than anything else.

This is where people will encounter the abundance you have been discussing this weekend.

Our relationship with the Trinity gives us a clue about *how to respond*, to

- inequality and social fragmentation
- and the *commodification of everything*.

It gives us a clue about our vocation as Christians in the world.

Not just in the developing world, or in the Middle East, but *right here at home*.

It gives us a clue about *how to respond* after decades of unfettered liberal values and economics across successive governments which have undermined family life, values and relationships.

*How to respond* to people left behind, who have been dishonoured, who feel insulted and humiliated, deprived of their place in the world, who feel that no one values what they have to offer.

#### 4. Convergence

Our society is in desperate need of a reset. There is a relational deficit.

Over the last 50 years we have lost a lot of the strength that families and communities used to hold.

We have seen increasing dependence on ‘the council’ or ‘the state’ to fix things that in some cases might be done better by us.

At the same time we have become too complacent that ‘the market’ is somehow ‘out there’ and outwith our influence, when in fact we are all market ‘actors’ with the ability to make change.

Identity politics, extremism and a culture of individualism make it all the more challenging.

In this climate, how on earth are we going to live together?

Policy change may help, but it’s *our* traditions of love, hope, responsibility, human dignity, family, mutual obligation, belonging, community, relationships, and the preferential option for the poor, that are sorely needed now.

And so - the healing of our society comes into convergence with the mission of the Church.

Remember the theme of St Paul’s letter to the Ephesians?

He talks about the unity and reconciliation of the *whole of creation* through the agency of the Church.

This is why we think the principle of the Common Good *is an idea whose time has come*.

#### 5. The Common Good

So let’s talk about the Common Good.

We all think we know what it means. But it can seem a bit woolly sometimes can’t it.

The idea resonates from Aristotle, to Ubuntu, Shalom, across humanist, Jewish, Christian and other traditions.

No one has a monopoly on the Common Good.

But we find it is particularly well expressed in the body of thinking known as Catholic Social Teaching. I will say a bit more about this later.

So - the classic definition goes:

*“the Common Good is the set of conditions in which every individual in the community can flourish.”*

Yes. But it’s *how* that set of conditions is created that question.

We talk about the *practice of the Common Good*. Something we *do*.

It can be an aim, but it’s not a utopian ideal to be imposed by one ‘enlightened’ group upon another.

Such an approach always unravels if people are not involved in the solutions that affect them. It won’t stick.

It is something we *create*.

A gift exchange that leads to the conditions for mutual flourishing.

To build a Common Good requires people who may seriously disagree, whose circumstances are different, to *listen* to each other and negotiate their interests, find a way to live together.

Simply put, 'it is in *my* interests that *you* thrive.'

It necessarily involves unlikely partnerships.

So we talk about 'Common Good Thinking'.

Our inspiration for this comes from an unlikely partnership.

## **6. Together for the Common Good**

*Together for the Common Good* began as an idea of mine in 2011. I can only describe what happened as a movement of the Spirit, pulling me onto a completely different path. Having grown up the daughter of an Anglican bishop, I had been ploughing my own furrow. Living a quiet, ordinary life, working in graphic design, some volunteering and raising a family.

Then suddenly, for the first time since my conversion to the Catholic faith 20 years before, I felt I was being called.

My 'hidden journey' was breaking through.

I found myself drawing a cross, formed of the words ecumenism and social justice, and the intersection seemed to be saying to me say *reconciliation*. I wasn't sure what was going on really. But I prayed about it.

Over a year I must have had about a hundred conversations, people saying 'oh you need to talk to so-and-so'. So I followed a trail.

For the first time I felt drawn to learn about the partnership between my late father Bishop David Sheppard and Archbishop Derek Worlock. I found it still had currency, not just for church leaders - but now, for all of us.

They learned from each other, realising that *their* different gifts were complementary.

Gifts like Catholic Social Teaching, the 'see-judge-act' methodology, the outward facing church, the Anglican tradition of hospitality to, and care for, the whole nation, courage and negotiating skills.

For twenty years they worked together across *their* differences, putting the city of Liverpool first in a time of polarisation and division.

If they could do it, so can we.

They built bridges between mutually suspicious groups.

Listening to all sides, and interpreting between them – business, unions, Catholic, Protestant, the affluent, the left behind, the police, the black community, the Militant Tendency, the Thatcher government...

...their method for building Common Good was *reconciliation*.

They used that word.

This is a model we can all follow.

So for *Together for the Common Good*, now, for us this means acting as a catalyst, being firmly non-partisan and ecumenical, building relationships, promoting Common Good Thinking and practice, holding Common Good conversations and debates; assisting others and making publications. Later this year we'll be publishing a short booklet on the Bible and the Common Good, and piloting training resources for lay people, Christian leaders and teachers. We share

information through our website, Twitter and our free newsletter. It's all held by a tiny core team of two plus many associates working pro bono on our programmes, along with our circle of advisers. We punch above our weight thanks to our many partnerships and alliances.

*We want people of good will to work together*, across their beliefs and political differences for the Common Good.

We look for unlikely allies and partnerships.

I often hear my dad saying 'who are our allies?'

Following the Sheppard-Worlock tradition we want to see relationships of shared purpose flourish between the different Christian traditions - *as an example to all* that it is possible to live together - even though we disagree.

Like them, we're open to learning from each other.

We encourage 'Common Good conversations'.

The church *should* be known for being good at relationships.

We must resist tribalism and be willing to hear the truth as others see it.

We must have the courage to make the unattractive choices – to mix with those our own crowd rejects.

Remember, the goal of totalitarianism, as Orwell said, is to destroy our 'common basis of agreement.'

## **7. What kind of church**

Brexit and Trump are symptoms, only symptoms, of a deep realignment still unfolding.

Reconciliation is very important now.

We are being called to witness the mystery of the Trinity.

We know the *reality of human identity* is bound up in our relationship with God and with others.

I'm sure you know that feeling of being totally loved by God? That feeling of forgiveness?

This is the gift that Jesus gave and this is what the church is meant to do now, through us – to convey that feeling.

To everyone, especially the hard to love. Not just the easy people.

This is the kind of church Pope Francis has been asking us to be since *Evangelii Gaudium* and of course in *Laudato Si'*.

This is the kind of outward-facing church Sheppard and Worlock embodied a generation ago.

They listened to mutually suspicious and hostile groups. Faced hard truths. No politically correct silencing with them.

They refused to be tribal.

They were branded statist by the Thatcherite right. And as traitors by the hard left.

But they managed to build trust. They brought people together.

They worked with business, encouraging their crucial role for the Common Good.

They empowered *local leadership* in 'communities of the left behind', affirming their cultures - not trying to change them, smooth them over, or impose a middle class culture on them.

They worked alongside people, not doing *to* but working *with*, building up their capacity.

They were not socialists, but radical traditionalists for whom poverty and exclusion was an affront to the body politic.

They were loyal to their own traditions: no syncretism there. They never took communion together in over 20 years.

It is a powerful witness when people who believe very different things or come from different backgrounds decide to work together for the Common Good.

## **8. Catholic Social Teaching**

It is clear that Catholic Social Teaching featured strongly in their partnership.

CST has been described as 'a hidden gem' of the Catholic Church. Rather too well hidden, don't you think.

Originally it was intended as a 'gift to all people of goodwill'.

Some refer to it as the 'theology of the Holy Spirit in practice.' I really like that.

It is a powerful recipe for building a common life. So we want to make it more widely known.

But sometimes the name *Catholic Social Teaching* can be a barrier to non-Catholics.

So we talk about 'Common Good Thinking.'

We use "the Common Good" as an overarching term to refer to all the core principles set out in Catholic Social Teaching: because the building of the Common Good depends on the application of all of them.

We may think we know them but it's worth reminding ourselves of the principles:

'the primacy of the human person, human dignity, the dignity of work, the Common Good, equality, respect for life, reconciliation, subsidiarity, solidarity, participation, association, and the preferential option for the poor'. Also, we should remember the importance of that it calls the 'intermediate institutions' - the clubs, associations, guilds: the precious organisations that make up civil society but are not part of the state.

CST is not a lifeless set of rules, it's a powerful, living tradition coming out of over 120 years of learned experience - from the reality of how people live, from the messiness of human life.

Although we refer to it as Common Good Thinking, we are careful to remain true to its integrity.

It's important that we give weight to *all* of the principles, and *resist* the temptation to 'pick and mix' based on our own particular concerns.

At entry level, we present Common Good Thinking as: 'The Common Good; The Person; Relationship; Stewardship; and Everyone is included, no one is left behind.'

It offers a constructive process of discernment – not a protest narrative.

It is not policy prescriptive.

When properly balanced it transcends partisan positions.

It rejects ideology, both individualist and collectivist, both neoliberal and big state ideologies,

as both have a tendency to dehumanise.

This is a *way of seeing* human reality anchored in deep experience and in tenderness.

Catholic Social Teaching will only secure credibility as widely as it should, if it transcends party politics.

For a long time the idea of 'social justice' has been seen as the preserve of a minority. Indeed there has been a tendency to see Catholic Social Teaching as the territory of activists.

*What about everybody else?*

The majority have in effect been *cut out* and their contribution lost.

How do we get those people involved?

Most people want to contribute and build a better world - but they don't want to be part of a politicised, tribal approach.

We can no longer afford to limit our potential.

The situation is really quite serious. So we cannot continue to do things the way they've always been done.

We need a joined-up approach that makes it possible for everyone to find their own 'hidden journey' linking with their vocation.

This is deeply connected to the mission of the Church.

So-called 'social action' – or putting our faith into practice to make a difference - is not an 'add-on' but an integral part of what it means to be a Christian.

We can only do this authentically if we see ourselves, and everyone we encounter, through the eyes of God.

As Rowan Williams says, when we meet another person we are on sacred ground.

## **9. The *practice* of the Common Good**

So what does Catholic Social Teaching, or Common Good Thinking, look like in practice?

We can be bearers of the gift of the common good.

Its potential is only limited by our imagination.

My curiosity has led me to find out what is going on across different church traditions.

It's time to climb out of our silos.

Let me share with you just a few examples of where that instinct for 'Common Good Thinking' is at work:

- It's in those choosing to live in the outer estates, abandoned towns, fostering local leadership within 'communities of the left behind,' building the kingdom, raising their kids, *choosing not to leave* when metropolitan temptations beckon;
- it's at work in those making a physical gift for the common good in their neighbourhoods by re-purposing parts of church land and buildings to provide homeless shelters, affordable housing, space and support for local start-ups;
- It's in those who understand the importance of working *alongside*, rather than *speaking for* people who are struggling; moving from *handouts* to a *hand-up* approach; take Anne Marie, who I mentioned earlier who felt the church wasn't

interested in her. Someone actually knocked on her door and asked if she wouldn't mind helping by baking a cake for a parish event. She was astonished that anyone would ask her for help. But they said 'We need you.' Two years on she is leading a community project. This *asset-based community development* approach focuses on what she *can* do, not on what she *lacks*, not what *services* need to be provided for her, not on what *systems* need to be changed. This *relational* approach leads to material changes too.

- We can see that Common Good Thinking instinct at work in those keeping alive the local clubs and associations – reclaiming responsibility and belonging, building back a sense of local pride;
- it's in those tenacious people starting Community Land Trusts, creating permanently affordable housing in their local areas;
- It's in the thousands of trained volunteers involved in the evangelical churches' parish-based franchises, supporting people out of debt and addiction, as street angels, running job clubs, mentoring, night shelters, parenting and resilience, working with ex-offenders, counselling in the workplace, befriending, making lunch in the school holidays, foodbanks... The huge growth in this area is often unknown in other denominations;
- It's at work in those cultivating green spaces in our cities and the countryside, spaces everyone can share, parks, public spaces, fields, forests, ancient hedgerows;
- We can see it in those supporting refugees and asylum seekers, helping them build relationships within the community;
- It's there in those bringing together victims and perpetrators of hate crime in reconciliation;
- It's at work in those bravely challenging Islamic fundamentalists in their communities; and those helping Muslim women learn English;
- It's there in small local business owners serving their communities for very small margins;
- That common good instinct is there especially in those building relationships where there is mistrust and suspicion: between old and young, urban and rural, left and right, poor and affluent, business and unions, faith and secular, management and employees, tenants and landlords: can you see what I mean? We need to get attuned to noticing the tensions and getting into that reconciliation space. Especially important is the work of building trust between Remainers in cosmopolitan cities and Brexiteers in post-industrial towns;
- it's there in those visiting the lonely in their street, bringing a little tenderness – and in so doing finding themselves benefiting too;
- it's active in those professionally trained volunteers working in couple counselling, keeping families together and preventing relationship breakdown;
- it's active in those teachers encouraging responsibility and character among the young; and in those trying to reform a higher education system which has so dishonoured the poor and driven a division between the educated and the uneducated;

- it's at work in those who foster a relational approach in the workplace, re-humanising bureaucratic systems that have lost their soul; and among health and social care workers challenging managerialism and one-size-fits-all processes, bringing love into the system;

That instinct for 'Common Good Thinking' is reshaping the economy too...

- in the fast-growing social impact investment sector – not many people know about this - where it's now possible for investors to invest in companies with social and environmental missions, while also generating viable returns - proving the market can work for social good;
- it's in the Church Credit Champions network teaching good budgeting and savings culture in hundreds of schools;
- there are the volunteers involved with ShareAction's network who question pension fund providers if their investments are ethical - imagine if we *all did this*?
- the massive impact of the credit union networks tackling financial exclusion – did you know that since Archbishop Justin's challenge to Wonga started, payday lending declined by 68%. And it's so much more powerful when the churches work together – so it's great to hear the Catholic Church has just joined other denominations in the Churches Mutual Credit Union;
- There's the Churches Investors Group and CCLA who invest billions ethically on behalf of thousands of small churches, religious orders and charities, and use their collective leverage to get blue chip companies to improve their supply chains and business practices;
- There are the organisations striving to reform corporate culture such as the Blueprint Trust and the B Corp movement... and the Christian entrepreneurs who honour the dignity of work and include their workers in decision-making...

I could go on. Christians across different church traditions are, consciously or without realising it, putting Common Good Thinking into practice.

## **10. Our mission, working together**

We can be carriers of the gift of the Common Good in so many different ways.

Many people are unaware of what they could do, and that they can do so right where they are.

Don't be intimidated. Modest steps: it doesn't have to be dramatic.

The mission of the church is bound up in the renewal of society.

An outward-facing church - where the laity plays a leading role linking spirituality with individual vocation - can rehumanise systems that have lost their soul, reshape the economy, encourage leadership among the poor, build community and reconcile estranged interests.

So, why should we work together?

We'll be so much more effective if we get out of our silos and work together with other Christian traditions.

The Spirit doesn't discriminate according to denomination.

Of course, there are lots of reasons why we don't. Or why we don't want to.

It's a hassle. Collaboration is too time consuming. We are sceptical of unfamiliar approaches.

Every denomination thinks each other's practices are weird, even within the same church!  
Different ways of praying: hands up / hands down!

We may strongly disagree politically. Let's face it we will always have excuses.

But working ecumenically *and* cross-party is at the heart of our work.

Like Sheppard and Worlock, our body language should speak for itself: standing side-by-side we can model an outward-facing church acting in the interests of the people, not in the interests of our individual institutions.

Like they achieved, we can be a church not only in the pews, but also in the street, in factories, in offices, in business.

We need each other's different gifts, connections, dispositions and expertise.

We should be known as honest brokers.

As Christians, our *default* should be working across our differences, as witnesses to the possibilities of reconciliation.

*First* we are collaborators with God. It's *his* plan not ours.

As Pope Francis says, we are called to foster a culture of encounter.

Reconciliation should be our method for building the Common Good.

It comes from our tradition and we have the Trinity to guide us.

We will need the humility and courage to get to know people we may think we have nothing in common with.

Can we be the ones who persuade people to 'stay in the room', and keep the dialogue going, recognising the humanity in everyone, and affirm the legitimacy of what they have to say?

Can we intentionally reach beyond our own echo chambers, say, read news from different sources, ask advice from someone we know disagrees with us, subvert the social media algorithms which dangerously make interaction *less* likely with people different from ourselves?

We should always be open to working with unlikely partners.

We need to be building alliances of good will, in humility: 'who can I work with to get this done? What skills do you have? Can you help me?'

Vulnerability is a strength.

The political landscape is changing hour by hour. But the tradition of the Common Good is mature.

We should be asking:

*'Lord, surprise me, show me who you want me to work with.'*

We should be clear about our centre of gravity. The icon tells speaks of the dignity of the human being.

Each of us is invited to enter into a relationship with the Father, with Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit.

The human person is not reducible to his or her rights, nor a commodity, nor the subject of handouts; the human person is invited by his or her life to show forth the glory of God in relationship with others.

We are custodians of values that are transformational: values of love, hope, responsibility, human dignity, respect for life, family, community, relationships – and rootedness in place.

We want to see the flourishing of everyone.

It is in all our interests that everyone thrives.

In this secular context, what will the church be known for?

Rituals or relationships?

It's our *calling* to be a people capable of witnessing to what it really means to be a human person.

This is the kind of church our country needs us to be, and our church needs to be like this for its own renewal: to be a people who share the gift of the Common Good.

Thank you.

I will leave you with this passage, one of the best expressions of the common good:

*'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'* (Jeremiah 29.7)

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**Jenny Sinclair** is the daughter of the late Bishop David Sheppard, who had a celebrated ecumenical working partnership with Archbishop Derek Worlock and Free Church leaders in Liverpool a generation ago. Raised an Anglican, in her twenties she had a conversion experience and was received into the Catholic Church. In 2011 she felt moved to develop an idea and looked for allies. They founded the ***Together for the Common Good*** (T4CG) project, now an emerging movement aiming to bring alive the principle of the common good and make it more widely known and applied. T4CG encourages people of good will to act as agents of change and work together across their differences, for the Common Good.

Find out more about Common Good Thinking and subscribe to our newsletter at our website, <http://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk>