Just World

How does God call us to balance the interests of people and planet?

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It is a great pleasure to speak to this diverse audience and to mine the riches of Christian social and ecological thinking on the important topic of a just world. But it is also daunting, not just because of the expertise of the speakers who have preceded me in this lecture series, but because the stakes have now been raised, as we move to ever larger topics: from the person to the economy and work to the world itself. The challenges that face us are dizzying in their range, complexity and difficulty and I am no climate change expert or scientist, but I do believe that we have some theological resources – treasures old and new – that can be of substantial benefit in guiding us. I shall commend four key elements of Catholic Social Teaching – the dignity of the person with rights and duties, solidarity, subsidiarity and the common good – which have synergies with my own Anglican social traditions.

It is timely to address the topic of justice for humankind and for the natural world in the context of a national conversation in which the needs of people and nature are perceived to be in competition: speed limits in built up areas, ULEZ low emission zones and the Prime Minister's retreat from some Green policies with the aim of helping people struggling to meet their economic costs. We can all imagine situations when the needs of the poor and those of the environment can really clash, and you can separate humans further into rich and poor. There are areas of present-day Jakarta, for example, where the rich live in gated enclaves of pollution-free, insulated, environmentally protected buildings with their own electric grids, with the poor in shacks up against their walls in toxic living conditions, no sanitation and breathing polluted air. Climate change may create an even more disadvantaged global south, with extreme weather conditions putting millions of lives at risk, while the rich north find ways to protect themselves.

So, do we live in a world in which interest groups always compete for resources, in which goods such as prosperity and environmental concern are at odds? Do we deny developing countries the benefits industrial and technological advances have brought our own, but at the cost of global temperatures rising to even more dangerous levels? For a 1.5 degree rise in global temperatures is now anticipated.as early as the 2030s. There have been temperature shifts and ice ages eight times in the world's history, but at no point did the percentage of carbon dioxide rise above 300 parts per million, and that only once. The figure in May 2023 was 424. There can be no doubt that humankind and our energy use have created this unprecedented situation, which has no parallel.

Such figures as I have just given can terrify us; and the intractability of the problem make us just freeze or accept our situation as fated. Some extreme evangelical groups even argue from this unprecedented situation for the proximity of the apocalypse. And yet, we do have theological resources to help us take a less tragic view. The central idea that should drive our action is something that Anglicans will have heard Sunday after Sunday since the liturgical revisions of the 1970's, in which we pray in our intercessions that we may 'honour one another and seek the common good'.

The Common Good is not the Greater Good of Utilitarianism, in which the desires and needs of the individual might be negated so that society's good might be served: the greatest good of the greatest number. Utilitarianism might say that the quarter of the world's population who live in coastal areas might just have to accept the loss of their homes caused by rising sea levels, if the energy needs of the majority are to be met. By contrast, the Common Good believes that true goods are those we *all* share, individually and together. As the sixteenth-century Anglican theologian, Richard Hooker puts it in his *Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 'the good which is proper unto each man belongeth to the common good of all, as a part of the whole's perfection' (VIII, ii,18). The idea goes back to the Greek philosophical world, so that in Plato, a flourishing person and a flourishing polity alike were the result of the full perfection and development of each part or person, working interdependently and ordered by justice. Hooker also looks back to Aristotle's *Politics*, where he argues that political life is aimed at living well, and sharing virtues which are not divided by being shared. And to Thomas Aquinas, who argues that a law is that which serves the common good and helps direct us to our end/goal, which is union with God. It is this which also undergirds Catholic Social Teaching today, vividly expressed by Pope Francis during the pandemic in 2020:

> The coronavirus is showing us that each person's true good is a common good, not only individual, and, vice versa, the common good is a true good for the person. If a person only seeks his or her own good, that person is selfish. Instead, a person is more of a person when his or her own good is open to everyone, when it is shared. Health, in addition to being an individual good, is also a public good. A healthy society is one that takes care of everyone's health.

What all these thinkers share is a belief that the good of you and me as individuals is interconnected. As Jeremiah writes, 'seek the welfare of the city … for in its welfare you will find your own welfare' (Jer.29.7). Or as Dante's formerly rivalrous and ambitious souls now greet a newcomer in Paradise: 'here comes one who will increase our loves'. More people arriving in heaven does not mean a smaller degree of blessedness, but its multiplication. True goods are not lessened by being shared.

This suggests that there is a possibility for policies involving shared good rather than competitive goods. That my good is actually constituted partly by yours. Or as Martin Luther King put it to his children, when talking of giving them an excellent education, when others do not enjoy such a benefit: 'you will never be what you ought to be until they are what they ought to be'. We are all diminished by poverty, by inequality, by the degradation of the earth, air and seas.

The Common Good is an idea which Christians share with peoples of other faiths, who hold to a transcendent Good which stands over us and calls us to account, to whom we orient our actions and understanding. It links to ideas of natural law, what C. S. Lewis called the 'Tao', in his book, *The Abolition of Man* (1944), the fit between human beings and the world, which gives us our limits and offers a source of value beyond the self. Even to claim we have limits is to go against the human self-aggrandisement that fuels a growth agenda. So how then can this theology of the Common Good lead us to make better decisions about the competing claims of poverty and sustainability?

You can see a simple example in one policy that Rishi Sunak cancelled this Autumn, which was the requirement for those renting out accommodation to raise their properties to a higher energy efficiency rating. Yet if landlords insulated their properties better, then their tenants would be warmer and pay lower heating bills. It would cost landlords money, but they would attain a higher energy efficiency rating and attract more tenants, as well as own a property worth more if they sold it. The action would save money for the NHS because warmer, less damp homes would prevent some illnesses. All this before we begin to assess the savings in energy consumption and lowering of carbon emissions. It is true that some insulation materials are made burning fossil fuels, but wood fibre and wool are natural substitutes. Indeed, upland sheep farmers often resort to destroying wool that is not of high enough quality for garments, so there would be an economic gain for them too. And even taking the environmental costs of insulating homes into account, the whole point of insulation is that it prevents the need for heating. I have neighbours in modern, well-insulated houses who rarely put on their central heating at all. And as temperatures rise and we have heatwaves of intensifying ferocity, well-insulated buildings keep cooler too, obviating the need for air-conditioning. In the UK, insulating buildings would save 14% in greenhouse gas emissions, but in the USA it would save a massive 40%. Poor people would keep warmer and be less prone to ill-health; they would have more money to feed their families. And we should all benefit in direct and

indirect ways. It is a virtuous circle in which the needs of individuals, groups and society are all served and good is shared.

As well as stressing the communal, common good thinking puts equal emphasis on personal responsibility. Popes Leo XIII and Pius XI addressed the rise of Marxism and later Soviet Russia by charting a middle way between capitalist individualism and communist collectivism and denigration of the individual person. *Rerum* Novarum states:

> All people have equal dignity regardless of social class, and a good government protects the rights and cares for the needs of all its members, rich and poor. Everyone can contribute to the common good in some important way.

An example of a virtuous circle that embodies this principle of each person valued and contributing to the common good is a primary school rebuilding in Welshpool. Not only does this school have solar panels and heat pumps, it makes full use of the heat the children give out through its levels of triple glazing and insulation, with a ventilation system which distributes the warm air. Kiddywatts, as they call it powers the system, giving the children a direct sense of their contribution to the social good. They gain a sense of agency and dignity.

This sense of the dignity of the human person is a central pillar of Christianity which should be at the heart of our policies to make a juster world. While droughts in East Africa have long been a common feature, climate change has made them, even by a conservative estimate, one hundred times worse, causing destitution, migration and death. Subsistence farmers in those regions are the victims of the choices and actions of people in developed countries, who consume so much more and create these conditions. There needs to be restitution at the government level, but it is equally important that sufferers are not seen as purely passive victims and are enabled to flourish with freedom and agency.

Desertification of these areas can be improved by quite simple changes in practice and these are being developed by local farmers like Yaouba Sawadogo in Burkina Faso, whose initiatives are being exported across the region. Yaouba developed the traditional farming technique of Zaï, which involves digging holes in the dry season to catch water and concentrate compost. He added natural fertiliser to the holes, so that even without rain, the crops grew. This practice can increase yields by 500%. Another traditional technique he developed with others was the laying of rows of stones close to the crops to retain what water does fall. And he planted trees, because the loss of trees has been such a cause of soil erosion and depletion and this too increased crop yields in dry times. In this way, local farmers are finding their own solutions to their problems, in ways that work with nature and are sustainable, and make them more independent.

In Niger, one result of drought and desertification has been sporadic violence between competing groups, with mainly male herdsmen competing with female pastoralists. Another cause of tension has been the arrival of refugees from Mali, again competing for scarce resources, and making desertification worse by cutting down tree cover for firewood. Two projects in partnership with aid agencies have enabled cooperation rather than competition in new market gardening techniques in which drip irrigation is used to minimise evaporation, which is combined with new ways of preserving water. Homes are now being built for the refugees, which will prevent the need for firewood, and are equally available for local people. They use a new brickmaking method, which adds tiny amounts of dry cement to soil. Houses built from these bricks need no water for cement mortar and the bricks need no energy for firing, unlike the older clay variety. This brings employment, shelter, environmental gain and community cohesion as everyone works together. Human flourishing and the flourishing of nature are united and there is work: which as John Cruddas reminded us in the last lecture is central to our creativity and dignity as persons.

Although there is much talk in climate change policy circles about a universal basic income, assuming lack of work in the future, when automization may put many people out of employment, this does not really chime with a Christian view of the person as having both rights and duties, as a responsible citizen or support the dignity of work which *Quadragesimo Anno* so emphasized. A better model was proposed by Anthony Atkinson in 1996. Participant Income or PI ensures a regular salary on the understanding that a person contributes in some way to society. People might offer care or contribute to environmental projects that do not have direct economic value. Although PI has been criticised as a form of forced labour and thus a contravention of human rights, the model does allow for choice of in what area of life a person will contribute. Heikki Hilamo, a Finnish economist, suggests adding skills or language training and other education to the mix, so that people are not trapped in low skill activities. Such participation will have so many benefits: friendship, a feeling of worth and direction, better health and again, dignity. And with environmental projects at its heart, the PI will have ecological value.

You can make an analogy here with foodbanks. There is no questioning the present need for such institutions and churches are hugely involved in supporting their work. While I admire people who run such helpful initiatives, we also need to ask ourselves what we are doing. Most of my life, people in Britain could feed themselves. Yet we are now in a situation in which people in work are often in need of food banks. Are we making it too easy for government by providing food which people should be able to afford for themselves? The Trussell Trust is acutely aware of the ambiguities of their work and have made representations to government about this. Yet they are stuck, filling a need that should not be there and ensuring children do not go to school hungry. And it is demeaning for those who have to make use of food banks.

A better model that began in Stockport and has been popular in many parts of the UK is the food pantry. Your Local Pantry is now nationwide, in a partnership between Skylight, the housing association who developed the idea and Church Action on Poverty. People become members, as if for a cooperative, and then can buy food (often donated by farmers and supermarkets) at greatly reduced prices. Like PI this enables a sense of human dignity and reciprocity as people give and receive. Members can both use the service and support it with their labour. While foodbanks are often places of comfort and support, food pantries have this built into their cooperative structure and often become the basis for a wider range of community activities. Again, individuals can learn how they can serve the common good and their own needs and have dignity in feeling they make a contribution.

For this is the logic of the so-called golden rule: 'love your neighbour as yourself'. While at the heart of the Christian gospel is self-giving love, Christianity does not promote the altruism of Comte's positivism, in which the good of others is the only goal of moral action. Christian love is about reciprocity and communion, so our own flourishing matters too and is, as I stated at the beginning of this lecture, ensured in seeking the good of other people. Relationality which is the nature of the persons of the Godhead characterises our own life in the Church as Christ's body and should inform our social action. A Just world will be one in which relations of justice will be reciprocal and balanced like the pans of the scales held by the figure of Justice herself.

You can contrast this with policies such as carbon trading or the congestion charge in cities. In both cases the environment benefits to a variable extent, but reciprocity is lessened and the poor miss out, and the preference for the poor is another key element of catholic Social Teaching. Congestion charging too often benefits the rich, who can just pay and drive, and punishes those who need to use a van for work. The rich avoid personal responsibility for their actions, which is even more true of carbon off-loaders.

In carbon trading, big users of fossil fuels buy credits to carry on emitting, while other countries or groups institute carbon reductions and earn money from selling carbon offsets. This sounds reciprocal but it is not as just as it appears. We have had the Clean Development Mechanism since the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 but emissions have carried on rising. The reason is that CDM allows the big companies to carry on emitting and does not drive substantive carbon reduction, because they are not required to make radical changes. Less developed countries do not benefit as well as they should from a marketized approach to carbon pricing. Furthermore, a recent study found frequently a mismatch between claims of reforesting and the actual effect on local people, such as thoughtless extensive tree planting, which reduced the water table so local farmers could not grow their crops. Moreover, much of carbon offsetting in the rainforest is about not cutting down more trees and fraudulent claims overestimate the cost of this. And the whole idea of carbon trading

reduces personal and company responsibility, while the less-developed country is still affected by the climate changes and often by the pollution caused. It is not a moral market.

By contrast, relationality has been a crucial element in the development of renewable forms of energy in some countries. In 1981, residents of the Danish island of Aero got together to establish an energy and environmental office and 650 of them invested in a wind farm, profits from which are mainly ploughed back into community projects. They now have three solar hydrogen plants and the world's first electric ferry. Such local cooperatives for energy projects were encouraged by earlier Danish policies so that by 2000 84% wind capacity was community owned. Although Denmark have gone back on these policies, since 2011 20% of all windfarms must be communally owned. This means that communities come together and improve their cohesion and cooperation. They see the fruits of their investment in improvements to social care and support for local shops, as well as in their own pockets. And they do not regard the windfarm as an imposition. Now Denmark makes 67% of its electricity from renewable sources and this will be 240% in eight years' time.

Scotland has a number of cooperative ventures of this sort. The island of Tiree has surplus electricity, which it sells. It can finance extra social care and its financial and energy buoyancy helps to attract new residents to revivify this small community. And if this all sounds relatively easy to achieve on watery windy islands like the Orkney chain, where they produce 120% of energy from renewables and are about to run a ferry on hydrogen, using an electrolyser, Brixton in London has its own group of energy cooperatives. Of modest size, they have yet put solar panels on three areas of social housing and offer internships on developing storage capacity. They offer solarpanel making workshops and have branched out into a number of what we would call common goods: public banking, local food chains and worker cooperatives. In these examples, where community benefit is at the heart, environmental benefit and social benefit go hand in hand and what Gaston Fessard called the common good of mutual communion is enjoyed.

In the Netherlands community batteries have played a part in enabling renewable energy. For one problem about renewable energy is that it is stored differently and very large batteries and grid capacity are required. (This brings its own justice questions because batteries need rare metals, often mined by forced labour.) But individual home and community batteries and local sources mean smaller, simpler and nimbler grids can operate, not needing to communicate very often to larger systems. Soon battery recycling will mean less lithium and other metals will be required. This is all much more sustainable and again allows local people to have agency and give mutual support. It also cuts the cost of electricity.

The theological principle of operation in all my positive examples is that of subsidiarity, which was nicely defined by Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate* as 'the coordination of society's activities in a way that supports the internal life of the local communities'. He links it to the development of

responsibility, in which as many as possible can take part in decision-making. The classic definition is to be found in *Quadragesimo Anno:*

> It is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them.

If we are to balance and unify our social and environmental needs, we are going to need action at the local level, and we shall need all the lesser and subordinate organisations we can find to enable this. I have already given some examples of energy cooperatives and food pantries, which instantiate the Anglican Christian Socialism principles of F. D. Maurice, Ludlow and Kingsley of cooperation as the social representation of the divine order.

Yet just when we most need arenas where we can act together face to face and seek justice, such intermediate institutions are declining: trade union membership, for example, is only 23% of all workers, the lowest figure since such research began. The numbers belonging to political parties have similarly fallen catastrophically since the 1950s. Churches have shared in this free fall also, but they have resources other groups lack: first, the theological ideas I have been describing and secondly, buildings and communities dedicated to reconciliation and the common good , which could be of great use in our present crisis. For telling people the facts about climate change, species depletion and carbon emissions does not alone drive changes in behaviour, unfortunately. It might mean they do their recycling conscientiously, but it has not stopped the volume of holiday air travel. Even a suggestion of a universal 20 miles an hour speed limit in towns and villages is greeted with horror, despite the fact that evidence shows it would make the traffic flow more efficiently, reduce emissions due to stop/starting as well as save lives.

Subsidiarity for Catholics and Anglicans can be found in the concept of parish, which while it might be under stress in practical terms of affording or attracting enough clergy, especially in Lincolnshire, has potency as an image of a kind of belonging, of stability and inclusivity, of the level at which we relate face-to-face and can begin to embody the principles I described. Parish is particularly attractive to ecologists. Richard Mabey in an introduction to Revd Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selbourne* coined the term, 'parochial ecology' to describe his practice, which is to attend to the local and the ordinary. Robert MacFarlane similarly owns the term and wishes to rescue it from its associations with provincialism and insularity. Their attention, particularly Mabey's is to the urban railway siding as much as the country landscape, and Bob Gilbert in *Ghost Trees* has studied the natural world in the supermarket carparks and other unpromising places in a north London parish. What they articulate is a new conception of the concept of parish, so that it encompasses not just people, but also creatures, plants and stones. It is a local form of what Pope Francis calls, 'integral

ecology'. Or as what Mabey describes as 'the indefinable territory to which we belong, which we have the measure of. Its boundaries are more the limits of our intimate allegiances than lines on a map. These allegiances have always embraced wild life as well as human.'

The naturalists I have been describing all extend those gifts to the natural world, and we too as Christians, know that we are fellow-creatures and have allegiances with other natural forms. Indeed, we are all 'natural' and only God is supernatural. And creatures as Aquinas taught, are marked in some way with the divine qualities and share his image to some extent. This means it is a category mistake to pit nature versus the needs of the poor for they are necessarily united. Secondly, it means that in working for a juster world we begin where we are, parochially, in the ecosystems we inhabit and move outwards. We each of us live what Merlin Sheldrake describes as an entangled life in community with and dependence on plants and birds, earth and waters where we live. Sheldrake has shown how fungi heal our bodies and even soak up carbon. As *Laudato Si'* puts it: "The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures" (LS para. 240). We need to build this relationality into our policy- making at every level and include the inanimate creation in our concept of creaturehood. Christ said, in Luke 19 that if his disciples were silenced the very stones would cry out. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins compares Blessed Mary to the air we breathe appropriately, for the atmosphere itself is a common good.

The seventeenth-century Anglican poet, Henry Vaughan developed this agency of nature in his poem, 'The Bird':

All things that be, praise Him, and had
Their lesson taught them when first made.
So hills and valleys into singing break;
And though poor stones have neither speech nor tongue,
While active winds and streams both run and speak,
Yet stones are deep in admiration.

This theology of creation is a particularly British inheritance in our poetry and theology, encompassing both the Anglican Wordsworth and the Catholic Hopkins. It should help us to develop a more holistic understanding of our relation to nature and each other sharing that good of mutual communion.

If we are to save our world and its poor, I believe it will come from applying all these ideas of catholic social teaching I have been describing parochially and locally, to include the natural world: common good, dignity, subsidiarity and solidarity. Francis says about solidarity: 'it entails weaving a fabric of fraternal relationships marked by reciprocity, forgiveness and complete self-giving,

according to the breadth and the depth of the love of God offered to humanity in the One who, crucified and risen, draws all to himself". Targets can only take us so far: they are not ultimate goals. Humans will only bring about a just world from a teleological vision of the flourishing of all things in Christ and through positive delight in and appreciation of the natural world where we live, which the naturalist Gilbert White had so deeply, that he could stand all night watching the movements of toads. Elaine Scarry in her book, *On Beauty and Being Just* argues that it is from our appreciation of the beautiful that we learn true justice as it provokes us to care and protect. And it is noteworthy that the only two organisations that *have* grown in Britain are the National Trust and the RIPB, both concerned with appreciation and conservation: recognition of beauty and care.

A Just world and a peaceable one seems far from us right now, but we should not lose that most theological virtue of hope. Through acting at the local and parochial level imaginatively, in small ways that bear within them the good for people and the good for nature, we can contribute to the common good and inspire others to join us, as we learn to model virtuous circles. Indeed, wherever you live, from Blackburn to Bamburgh, there will be people to join in with of all faiths and none seeking the common good: perhaps gardening on roundabouts or supporting mental health schemes with animal care, cooking clubs in women's refuges, or butterfly counting in churchyards. When life is precarious we need each other more than ever, and to realise, as D. H. Lawrence put it that we are all of us from stones to people 'creatures in the house of the God of life'.

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