

# Talking Cents

December 2008

*Talking Cents is a group charged by the Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the church. Ministry Units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This issue is contributed by Jean Brookes, a member of the Anglican Social Justice Council.*

## Crisis: Opportunity?

Instant global communication has not collapsed but neo-liberal economics, particularly the investment market and credit processes, is wobbling at the knees. Personal and corporate greed is a major factor in what has happened. But the need to address poverty remains critical. Christian voices have the authority of Gospel commitment to the poor to continue to call for us to take up the opportunity to re-think economic policies.

Free trade has existed much longer than the development of the neo-liberal paradigm. 'Bad Samaritans: Rich Nations, Poor Policies and the Threat to the Developing World' by Ho-Joon Chang helps us understand this history. One conclusion of the author is that: 'The importance of international trade for economic development cannot be over-emphasised. But free trade is **not** the best path to economic development. Trade helps economic development only when the country employs a mixture of protection and open trade, constantly adjusting it according to its changing needs and capabilities. Trade is simply too important for economic

development to be left to free trade economists. (Random House Business Books, 2007, page 83)

A more local history is found in 'Rescuing the New Zealand Economy: What Went Wrong and What We Can Do to Fix It' by Bryan Gould. The author analyses the "extreme monetarist policies" of the last two or three decades and then recommends some economic changes, including expanding the role of the Reserve Bank. (Craig Potton Publishing 2008, pages 131-2)

The concept of 'redistribution of wealth' caused some panic in the USA Presidential Election. But for many Christians from a range of theological persuasions, such a concept is central to their understanding of Jesus in his context and of prophetic voices throughout Christian history. Such a vision does not deserve to be marginalized as 'ideological' or 'unpatriotic'.

At this moment of global economic and social crisis it is noteworthy that the early

church credited the Mother of Jesus with a similar vision: 'he hath shown strength with His arm; He hath scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He hath brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; He hath filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty' (Luke 2:52-3). If we add John the cousin of Jesus to the picture, we have a 'Holy Family' that is a bit more politically challenging than our average Christmas card! From such a family emerges the figure of Jesus the Christ.

As the present dominant international economic system unraveled, I kept coming back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine setting. The Roman Imperial Power and its Palestinian systems failed to crush the practical dream that had a core commitment to re-distribution of individual and communal wealth and power. The empty tomb of Easter could be seen as a symbol of the death of old systems that were to be transformed in the Jesus communities of every age and place. The emptiness of the tomb was one sign of the magnitude of change facing the disciples. We could see it as accurately representing the depth of our present economic crisis. But we also have an opportunity to form policies that are primarily focused on emancipation of the poor rather than saving institutions who remain part of the problem.

The dominant economic system that is now falling apart has allowed the health and wellness of millions of people and the earth to be put at risk. The Christian church needs to keep on saying that this is a time for transformation not reformation, whatever it costs those of us who are middle-class.

If we are not to be seen as hypocritical, we need to start with our own communities of

faith. We could walk away from an empty tomb of false economic assumptions, and join the divine gardener. We could seek to form hope-filled communities of economic and social justice rather than walled communities of personal security. We have the opportunity to identify Gospel changes to our liturgical, educational, pastoral and investment ministries. We would be seeking practical ways in which we could be signs of hope for the poor and the earth.

The opportunity to think in new ways is seen in the examples that follow:

- 'God is enough. When we are afraid to lose what we have, let us offer it up to the One who gave it freely, and share.' (S. Diane Trollope-Sudbury, Canada, for WCC Day of Peace 21 Sept'08)
- 'We need ... full potential of individuals and communities.' (Bishop Richard Randerson, in 'A Word in Season,' Matai House, Wellington, 2008)
- 'A covenant is a bond of love and trust ... and a commercial contract that creates the market is about the logic of competition.' (Jonathan Sacks, 'Covenant in Today's World,' Tui Motu InterIslands, October 2008, page 15)
- 'The lives of others continually spill over into mine in what I think, say, do and achieve. And conversely my life spills over into that of others: for better and for worse.' (Pope Benedict XVI, in Spe Salvi 48, 2007)