THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
DIOCESAN SYNOD
JUNE 2014

One day there was a shepherd looking after his sheep on the side of a deserted road in the Highlands. Suddenly, a brand new bright red Porsche 911 appears and screeches to a halt beside him. The driver, a woman wearing a Chanel suit, Ray Bans and a Cartier watch, steps out and says to the shepherd 'If I can guess how many sheep you have can I keep one?' The shepherd thinks this is rather strange, but looking around at the huge flock spread across acres of hillside and thinking it would be impossible to count so many sheep, replies 'Okay'.

The woman connects a laptop to a mobile phone, scans the field using GPS, opens a database linked to files with logarithms and pivot tables, then prints out a two hundred page report on a high tech mini printer. She studies the report and says to the shepherd 'You have exactly 1,586 sheep'.

The shepherd replies 'That's correct. You can have the pick of my flock'. So the woman packs away her equipment, looks at the flock and picks up one of the animals.

As she is about to leave, the shepherd stops her and says 'If I can guess your profession, will you return the animal to me?' The woman thinks for a moment and then agrees. The shepherd says 'You are an economist for a government think tank,' says the shepherd. 'Amazing!' responds the woman, 'You are exactly right! But tell me, how did you deduce that?'

'Well," says the shepherd, '"You turned up here although nobody called you. You want to get paid for an answer I already knew, to a question I never asked, and you don't know anything about sheep farming. Now give me back my dog."

I've started with one of the many jokes that people tell about economists because I want to focus much of what I say this morning on economics. Now, please don't turn off at this point. Economics is vitally important for us as Christians. Some New Testament commentators have estimated that about one in ten verses in the gospels is either about money or possessions. Jesus evidently thought it was a very important area of life.

Let me tell you about two recently published books, one a study of epidemiology and the other a book about economics, both of which are causing quite a stir.

The first book is called *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. Both teach epidemiology, one at the University of Nottingham Department of Medicine and the other at the University of York. It's a fairly technical book full of statistics in which they look at a large number of different countries in the world. They compare statistics about social problems with quality of life. They looked at areas such as life expectancy, social mobility, literacy, infant mortality, and obesity. They argue that countries which have the largest gap between the rich and poor also have the greatest levels of health problems and unhappiness. Their research concludes that people in more equal societies live longer, are healthier and happier than people in more unequal societies. Wilkinson has also argued that 'What the evidence shows is a tendency for more unequal societies to be socially dysfunctional right across the board. It is not that one country or state has good health but high levels of violence, or high teenage birth rates but low levels of drug abuse. Instead, the pattern is for most problems to become better or worse together.'

The second book is by Thomas Piketty, a French economist. It has become such a best seller that for some weeks it's been impossible to buy a copy. It's called *Capital in the Twenty-First Century.* It has already been translated into several languages and is causing a great deal of debate among academics, politicians and social commentators. I have to confess it's not the most gripping read – it's not exactly a J K Rowling block buster. Indeed, it sends me off to sleep about as quickly as reading the minutes of General Synod. Nevertheless it has a number of important things to say.

Piketty claims that the statistics prove that the gap between rich and poor is getting greater. His asserts that in the 20^{th} century inequalities decreased due to the two world wars but that in recent years we have reverted to the long term trend for inequalities in wealth to increase. He says this happens because the annual growth rate is generally about 1% to 2% while the return on capital is generally 4% to 5%. So, for example, in Europe the richest ten percent of the population earn about 35% of the income but own about 70% of the wealth. Piketty's book is being vigorously debated around the world and not everyone agrees with every point he makes. Indeed, when you get to the part of the book in which Piketty sets out his solutions there is considerable disagreement as it enters into the political arena of Right versus Left.

Nevertheless, it is quite clear that across the world, levels of inequality are staggering. And before any of you accuse me of being naive and simply swallowing what a left-wing French economist has written, listen to what Mark Carney, the Governor of the Bank of England, said in a lecture on 'Inclusive Capitalism': 'Within societies, virtually without exception, inequality of outcomes both within and across generations has demonstrably increased'. In the same series of lectures Christine Lagarde of the IMF said, 'One of the leading economic stories of our time is rising income inequality, and the dark shadow it casts across the global economy. The facts are familiar. Since 1980, the richest 1 percent increased their share of income in 24 out of 26 countries for which we have data...The 85 richest people in the world, who could fit into a single London double-decker, control as much wealth as the poorest half of the global population – that is 3.5 billion people. With facts like these, it is no wonder that rising inequality has risen to the top of the agenda—not only among groups normally focused on social justice, but also increasingly among politicians, central bankers, and business leaders.'

Now the reason why I've described the argument of these books is because they touch on deep issues in our own faith and in the Judeo-Christian tradition. They also impact on how we should order the corporate life of our diocese.

As I said, the scriptures have a lot to say about money, remuneration and fairness. In the Old Testament riches are sometimes viewed as a gift from God (Gen13.2; Ps. 112.3; Eccl. 5.19), but we are also told that riches can be dangerous and that we have a duty to care of the poor (Deut 15.1-11; 24.18-22; Ps 49; Amos 2.6-7; 4.1; 8.4-6).

Jesus said that 'The worker deserves his pay' when talking about those who were sharing the gospel (Luke 10.7) but he also tells the rich young man that he should not defraud (Mark 10.19). He was blunt about the dangers of wealth: 'You cannot serve both God and mammon' (Matt 6.24), so one of the principal Christian disciplines is giving generously (Matt. 6.19-33; Luke 12.22-34). Rather surprisingly Jesus teaches that one of the main reasons why we must give is not so much of the benefit of the recipients, but so that we grow in God-like generosity (Matt 26.11).

When it comes to earnings, St Paul is clear that those who do not work, should not eat (2 Thess 3.10) and he himself worked as a tent-maker (1 Thess 4.11; 2 Thess 3.6-15). He warns against the dangers of greed (Rom 1.29; 1 Cor 5.10-11; 6.10) and teaches that it is wrong to exploit others (1 Cor. 7.30-31; 1 Thess 4.6). In his second letter to the Corinthians he uses the idea of 'equality', *isotēs*, when he refers back to the episode of the manna in the wilderness, where everyone ended up with the same whether they sought to gather more for themselves or not (2 Cor 8.12-15; Exodus 16.16-20). He also wrote about our obligations to one another and, for example, how the richer churches in Greece should support the poorer churches in Jerusalem (Rom 15.25-27). In all this there is a clear assumption that we should consider others when dealing with financial matters.

Paul summarises his teaching when he talks about Christ: 'For you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich' (2 Cor 8.9).

These theological principles, reinforced by some insights from economics, are the basis for our decision as a diocese to pay the living wage. It is an attempt in a world which often hides behind 'market fundamentalism' to ask questions of values, fairness and mutual responsibility if we are to build a society in which everyone has a stake. It is important that we do the same in relation to the financial ordering of our diocese. It's why we have a parish share scheme which seeks to be equitable. Now I have worked in four dioceses and I know that there is no such thing as a parish share scheme which every parish thinks is fair. There are always some anomalies. This is why we need to bear with one another and support one another.

This biblical teaching is also the basis for our annual Harvest Appeal which we have recently launched and which is called *Learning for Life*, which will support a literacy programme for women in Egypt. Please give generously.

Finally, a true story. A few years ago a new vicar was appointed to a pretty poor parish. It had a smallish congregation and morale was at rock bottom. There were half a dozen children in the Sunday School and there were questions about whether the church could survive much longer. However the minister and two faithful Sunday School teachers soldiered on. One week they were teaching about giving and decided to have a weekly 'penny collection' as a way of teaching the children how to give. They decided that the collections should be amassed over several weeks and should be given to causes outside the church.

The vicar noticed this, but the church couldn't pay its way and he was sad that they couldn't afford to give anything away. The general complaint at every PCC meeting was 'Why doesn't everyone understand how poor we are. We can't possibly pay even our much reduced parish share. It's all too difficult.' The whole congregation was well and truly in victim mode and felt sorry for themselves. All of the weekly collections were going to pay for the building and the parish share – nothing was given away and even then they couldn't make ends meet.

Despite this the new vicar decided that the only way forward was to create a spirit of generosity. He put a plate out at the back of church and each week they took a second collection, all of which was to be given away. There was outright opposition from some members of the congregation. For the first few weeks absolutely nothing was put it the plate, apart from the coins that the vicar had surreptitiously put there just before the service. Gradually small amounts of money were dropped into it. This was amassed and every few weeks it was given away to causes outside the church. The amounts slowly grew. Over a period of months members of the congregation stopped being obsessed with their own lack of money and instead became more and more aware of others. Within two years not only were they giving money away regularly but, amazingly, they had got on top of their problem of paying the share. Nowadays they are giving around 10% of their total income away. Each year they invite the outside charities to come along and talk about what they are doing and what difference the money makes.

We cannot separate the use of our money from our faith. I have been deeply impressed with the way that so many people in the diocese have responded to the financial challenge, even during the recession. My hope and prayer is that we will grow in confidence and in generosity as we prayerfully and carefully reflect on the way that we use our money and our resources as we strengthen our mission and ministry to the people of this diocese.

+Alan St Albans