

Inequality or Injustice? Benefit changes, bedroom tax and public ethics.

Introduction

Those of you who have a passing knowledge of the Church of England may feel that there is more than a hint of irony to a bishop standing up to speak about inequality and injustice. I represent a church that is far from the model of equality and justice – some would say very far indeed. The ever-contentious issue of women bishops is an obvious instance of how the church struggles with equality and justice, but there are many other topical examples – homosexuality and same sex marriage, investments, employment legislation for the clergy – take your pick. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury has remarked only in the last couple of weeks that a Christian is sometimes considered a “homophobic, misogynistic reactionary” by others in society today.

But look more closely at any of these issues, and you realise that it's harder than you might first think to take a clear moral line. Take the issue of women bishops by way of example. Nobody could deny that at present there is an inequality in the role currently played by men and women clergy in the church. The fact of the matter is that at present, men can be bishops and women cannot in the Church of England. That is an undeniable inequality. But is it also an injustice? Those who believe that women and men should play different, complementary roles in society and in the church would argue that this inequality is a proper difference, theological as well as social and physiological, that should be upheld. Others, myself included, believe it to be an injustice that should be corrected. But you take my point: one person's injustice is another person's justifiable inequality. To recognise an inequality, a human difference, is to observe a fact. But to call something an injustice is to make a moral point.

The former US diplomat and senator Daniel Moynihan once famously said, “everyone is entitled to his own opinion but not to his own facts.” His distinction is useful, and I would want to argue that as we begin to reflect on economic issues – bedroom tax and benefit changes – we need to be very clear of our facts, and also very clear at how we arrive at our ethical opinions.

So let me begin by outlining some key facts about benefit changes in the lifetime of our present government. Then I'll reflect with you on the tools that the Christian church has at its disposal as we seek to arrive at an ethical judgement about these issues. And I'll end by offering my own reflections – and throwing down some challenges to you – about how we might engage with the inequalities – or are they injustices? – of the present economic climate.

The facts

So to the facts. A series of changes in local and central government policies are incrementally reducing the income of some people very significantly. Analysis published by the Church Urban Fund indicates the scale of the impact. Childcare costs eligible to be paid by tax credits has been reduced from 80% to 70% with an average loss per week to those affected of £69 per week. The Local Housing Allowance cap introduced an average loss of £74 a week, while other technical changes about the sort of property, reduces payments by at least a further £9. The withdrawal of tax credit payments, more sharply as income rises, affects 3.5 million households; as they do more paid work they keep less of their increased earnings than before. The increase to 24 hours per week minimum to

qualify for Working Tax Credit means a loss of up to £75; the limit on Child Tax Credit to a joint earnings limit costs some families £10.50 a week; new under-occupancy rules cost those affected £14 a week on average; and the total benefit cap of £350 for a single person and £500 for an out-of-work family household means an average loss for those affected of £93 per week. The move from incapacity benefits to Employment Support Allowance means complete loss of benefit entitlement for thousands, and about half a million losing £48 a week with the end of Disability Living Allowance.

The introduction of Universal Credit has, meanwhile, been very widely welcomed as potentially transformative in encouraging more people into paid employment. Amalgamating six of the seven existing main means-tested benefits Universal Credit will reduce complexity by merging six into one, and is intended to ensure work always pays by rationalising the often haphazard impact of steep thresholds as benefits cut in and out. Its impact, though, is weakened by high childcare costs and the factors such as council tax benefit and free school meals, which are beyond its scope. Universal is something of an over-statement. There has been a disappointing recent announcement that after pilot implementation in four locations the anticipated roll out of Universal Credit to all new applicants this month has been restricted to a further six specific places, and implementation will not be complete until 2017.

So those are the facts. We could argue all night about the rights and wrongs of these policy changes – and perhaps during question time we'll do just that, or at least until it's time for the promised curry evening. But it seems incontrovertible that the new penalties for under-occupancy, the so called bedroom tax and other recent related changes will lead to greater inequality within our society.

But is it injustice? And how do we decide?

I want to pause at this point, because before we reflect on whether or not this inequality amounts to injustice, I need to be a bit more transparent about where I am grounded, and how I go about formulating my notions of justice.

Every morning, the first thing I, and the majority of my clergy colleagues and many of my lay colleagues do is pray the morning office; we say the service of Morning Prayer with psalms, bible readings and prayers. Parts of that daily service change daily and with the liturgical seasons to reflect the different moods of the year. But consistently, every day throughout the whole year, we recite a canticle called the Benedictus, which is the song sung of Zechariah following the birth of his son John the Baptist. In the middle of this canticle, we say these words: "And you child shall be called the prophet of the most high. For you will go before the Lord to prepare his way; to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of all their sins." So the day begins with the reminder that change is brought about not by violence or by the rigorous application of rigid laws, but by the slow, costly work of forgiveness. Then at the end of each day, at the evening office, Evensong, we recite another song, this time the Magnificat – the Song of Mary. She sings, and we recite these powerful words: "he has scattered the proud in their conceit, casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." So the day that began with an affirmation of

the power of forgiveness ends with a celebration of God's bias towards the poor and towards people who find themselves on society's underside.

It is impossible to pray these prayers daily, week in week out, without them forming and shaping our ideals, our expectations and our bias in life. Indeed, that's one reason why the discipline of daily prayer is so important in the life of the church. It trains our hearts in the way God loves and wants us to love. It trains our minds to think God's thoughts and to act according to God's insight. So, when I stand in front of you to talk about injustice and inequality, these songs are ringing round my ears and sounding in my heart. I cannot approach questions of justice without hearing Mary willing me to stand by those who feel powerless and subjugated. I cannot approach the question of how to support people who are fallible and vulnerable, without hearing God's call to give dignity to people by the forgiveness of their sins.

This is very important. Because it seems to me that if we can't always tell, at a policy level, whether or not an inequality amounts to an injustice, we can most certainly tell whether or not those affected are being treated with dignity. Let me return to the recent changes in taxation in order to give you concrete examples here. Politicians, or almost all of them, claim that most of us in our country are motivated by reducing the tax rate to encourage work and commitment, yet those on working tax credits are judged to be motivated to work in the opposite way, by an increase in the rate of withdrawal of credits for every pound earned above just £6,420 per year. The underlying assumption is that the more well-off in society work harder when motivated by the carrot, and the poor work harder when motivated by the stick. This is clearly more than inequality: by biblical standards it is also an injustice, not so much because the material consequences are that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, although that is certainly part of it. The crucial issue here is that the rich are treated with the dignity that enables them to flourish, while those with fewer resources are assumed to be also without goodwill or get up and go, or creativity or social commitment.

Likewise, while the so-called bedroom tax explicitly dictates how many rooms those in receipt of benefits are permitted to have regardless of their personal preference or their particular circumstances, such as shared residency responsibility for children, a consultation has been underway about relaxing planning regulations for building home extensions and conservatories. On the one hand there is compulsion and on the other there is a loosening of regulation. There is clear inequality of treatment which compels some and enhances freedom for others. Compulsion denies something that dignifies our humanity by the removal of the opportunity to think, to choose, to decide and we should tread carefully in that area as Mary reminds us in the Magnificat.

That's not to make a moral judgment about the politicians who are implementing these policies. I can well understand how, faced with the huge economic challenges of our day, a politician might well look for the most straightforwardly pragmatic answer – to set out clear rules that govern people's finances; to use the threat of punishment as a form of coercion for those who seem, superficially at least, to be unable or unwilling to contribute to the health of the economy. I also fully recognise the worldly fact that a politician who does not get rapid results makes themselves unelectable. And I absolutely recognise that there are some people out there who, with all the love and forgiveness in the world, will never take responsibility for their own growth and economic welfare.

Nonetheless, as a person of faith, and as a bishop, steeped as I am in the words of the Benedictus, the words of the Magnificat, and the Scripture from which they come, I want to

assert that this is certainly spiritually unwise, and in all probability economically and politically unwise too. Because God is absolutely clear that people are freed to grow and change not when they are rule-bound or punished, but when they are forgiven and loved - time-consuming, labour-intensive and costly as that may be.

Throwing down the gauntlet.

That's all well and good. But at this point, you would be wise, and, if I dare to use this word, "just", were you to turn the tables on me. You would be right to ask what the alternative might be. And this is where I need to be absolutely clear that I am a jobbing bishop not an amateur politician. I'm not here to be the voice of the opposition, or the government, much less to offer the Cabinet top tips on how to govern. Were I to attempt the role of amateur politician, I would be just that – amateur. The church rather than the Houses of Parliament (give or take my imminent excursions to the House of Lords), is my playground. And within the church, there are ways in which we, as a Christian community, experiment. We rightly dare to make fools of ourselves (some would say we are very good indeed at that!) because we throw out received political wisdom and dare to re-think, re-imagine social good, and then create different, sometimes prophetic ways of re-ordering our affairs. And I want to give just three examples of how we do that.

Let me start with education by way of a first example. That might seem an odd place to begin, given that the topic of this talk is about inequality and injustice. But I would argue that the quest for justice is inextricably linked to the freedom to think freely. Without that freedom, it is impossible to argue out the ethics of when inequality becomes injustice; it is impossible to filter out the true from the multiple subtle shades of falsehoods, impossible to discern the insidious ways in which people are marginalised and their dignity diminished. For me, prayer and intellectual freedom are closely related to each other – both are a reaching out to the unknown to give human life more depth and more dignity. The church, with its bias in favour of those on society's underside, has a vested interest in creating space in which minds can be trained to think and critique and debate – which is why I welcome this opportunity to speak at this university with its emphatic foundation and emphasis. The church is involved in education and committed to it, because education, human enterprise and human dignity cannot be separated.

My second example is related, but shows this same thinking applied directly to the task of re-imagining economic policy. Some of you may have heard of the Portsmouth Cathedral Innovation Centre. The CIC "unlocks the time and skills of volunteer mentors, seed funding and under-used buildings to create hubs in which firms can be grounded and grows. It also runs a national series of events and leadership programmes focused on developing an emerging generation of socially responsible managers." (website) It's based in our cathedral centre, Cathedral House, where it has already exhausted available space and so has spilled over into other nearby premises. This initiative was a direct response to the challenges of the recession, as a way of giving people, often young people, the confidence to build their businesses from scratch, and the dignity of earning their keep and supporting their families.

Finally, we need to risk speaking out about injustices, even at the risk of that backfiring on us. Take Justin Welby for instance, speaking out about lenders charging exorbitant interest, only to find that the Church Commissioners have a small holding in Wonga. On one level he made a bit of a fool of himself. But having spoken out, he sparked a debate, and put the debt industry firmly in the spotlight, where it has remained. In a similar vein, I

myself feel deeply concerned about low pay. I think most of us recognise the indignity and waste of unemployment and much policy aims to get people into work. I applaud that, but the minimum wage is worth £1k per annum less now than it was only five years ago in 2008. Nearly 5 million people earn less than the Living Wage. And that gap between the minimum and the living wage accounts for high costs to us all as well as the individuals and families involved. Having a job does not of itself move people off benefits and, often perpetuates the dependency against which freedom and faith rail. Two thirds of poor children in this country are, by official figures released very recently by an independent and statutory body, in working households. My demand and yours for cheap food, clothes and household items, often supplied by people on low pay, is at the high cost to us all of means-tested benefits and the high cost of childhood poverty for many. The justice-orientated church must name that high cost of low pay.

Of course it's possible that church initiatives will go horribly wrong – in fact, given the risks involved in being counter-cultural, I would say it's highly likely that some initiatives will not achieve all that we hope. Our schools and universities may yet succumb to the objective-driven culture of the day and fail to achieve the intellectual freedoms to which we aspire. Our social enterprise innovations may, despite our best efforts, make less difference than we might hope. Our commitment to a living wage may be dismissed as a token gesture, as pointless.

But for me, the risk is worth it. If our projects do fail, better that they fail through over-generosity than through mean-spirited individualism. If we are going to err, as being human we must, it's important to err and even make total fools of ourselves because we're working, in a very imperfect way, towards human dignity. If we don't at least make the effort as a Christian community then I for one would feel like even more of a fraud sitting down to say evening prayer and reciting the powerful words of the Magnificat, affirming God's commitment to justice whilst shunning my own responsibilities to make society fairer.

And so, as a bishop well used to making a fool of himself in one way or another – hopefully in line with God's bias towards society's underside - I throw down the challenge to you. What inequalities do you perceive as injustice? On what basis do you make those judgement calls? And what are you going to do about it?