

Our unfinished Millennium Jubilee

Presentation at Tearfund, 5 November 2014

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Next year will be the biggest moment for development in a decade. The deadline for the MDGs. New Sustainable Development Goals. A major financing summit in Addis Ababa. COP21 on climate in Paris.

Big summits on very big issues – and on all four fronts, the political context looks very tough. There's a clear risk of ending the year in stalemate or acrimony – with terrible implications for the poor, the planet, and prospects for global cooperation.

So civil society has a lot to do. And whenever I think of models to try and replicate, I think back not to the If campaign, not to Make Poverty History, but to the most powerful civil society movement I've ever seen: Jubilee 2000.

It was an incredible mobilisation, with incredible results: low income countries' debt fell from nearly 75% of their national income in 2000 to just over 25% today.

Most of all, it was an incredible *framing*, with the Old Testament idea of a Jubilee proving powerfully resonant with people far beyond the church groups that formed the campaign's backbone.

But I also think about the unfinished business we have with our millennium Jubilee. Because while jubilees were about debt cancellation in Old Testament times, they were also about much more than that.

A big environmental dimension, for one thing. Each Jubilee year was also a Sabbath year – a time of "solemn rest for the land". No crops were sown; people lived off what the land produced naturally. So Jubilees were very much about sufficiency, recognition of sustainable limits, the need for God's creation to rest.

They were about rest for the poor, too. Liberty was proclaimed throughout the land; everyone, slaves included, was free to go home. No one was to lend money to poor people at interest, or sell them food for profit.

And one more thing: they were about fair allocation of wealth. God tells Moses,

"The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me. And in all the country you possess, you shall allow a redemption of the land."

What that meant was a managed reset of land ownership, which came with very specific instructions – which, in the agrarian context of the time, was effectively a reboot of wealth distribution more generally, to keep inequality within sustainable limits.

So what about today? I think we have five tasks to complete our Millennium Jubilee.

- First, getting rid of the *second* half of extreme poverty. It's amazing that we achieved MDG1 seven years early. But over a billion people remain mired in poverty, increasingly in the world's war zones and ungoverned spaces.
- Second, locking in what we *have* achieved on poverty. For all that a whole generation has escaped poverty over the last twenty years, it's a very insecure escape – a game of snakes as well as ladders. It's all too easy to point to factors that could undo all the progress that's been made in emerging economies – slowing growth, lack of decent jobs, price spikes for basic goods, creaking urban infrastructures, or non-existent social protection systems.
- Third, tackling the economic insecurity that we increasingly see in developed countries. In the million people who rely on food banks here in Britain. In declining real wages, and the 'squeezed middle'. In how many jobs are being replaced by automation. In the number of families only just keeping afloat by working two jobs per parent – and even then struggling with debt.
- Fourth, facing up to the fact that we've allowed a winner-takes-all economy to emerge. The richest 300 people on earth own the same as the poorest 3 billion. And the Great Recession has made this worse, with the richest 5% of people reaping nearly half of the asset price gains from quantitative easing even as the poor cope with unemployment, austerity, and debt – a sort of Jubilee in reverse.
- And fifth, the deepest problem of all: the more we succeed on development, the more we fail on sustainability. Yes, we halved poverty over the last two decades – but by increasing global emissions by 50%. China's per capita emissions are now higher than the EU's. We need to reimagine this whole process we call 'development' – because when the countries we call 'developed' are also the least sustainable, and the developing countries doing best are rapidly heading the same way, then it's clear that something's gone badly awry.

And this too is about justice and equality. For as we race towards planetary boundaries, with the risk of catastrophic tipping points looming ever closer, the big question is who gets to consume what. And those of us in the rich world are using far more than our fair shares of carbon, water, land, energy, and everything else – which needs to change, urgently, to make space for the world's poor.

So these five challenges are the unfinished business we have before in our millennium Jubilee. And let's not forget what our oldest stories teach us about what happens when Jubilees are *not* observed.

Jeremiah 34 records with appalled contempt how, in a Jubilee year, the Hebrew aristocracy freed their slaves but then promptly re-enslaved them. The result: they were punished by being enslaved themselves in Babylon. What goes around, comes around.

Meanwhile, 2 Chronicles 36 continues, Israel's exile meant that the land could at last enjoy its long overdue rest. "*All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfil seventy years.*"

And that's the defining feature about sustainability issues – you deal with them, or they deal with you. Jubilees are not optional. They're what it takes to keep societies healthy and in balance. You miss them at your peril. And ours is overdue.

So what if we imagine a different future – one in which we *do* finish the job on our Millennium Jubilee, and reach the promised land of an economy that’s just and sustainable?

I think we can already sketch out its three core features – three things it would do, and which our current economy clearly doesn’t.

First, provide for everyone’s basic needs. Enough income for a life with dignity. Healthcare and education. Access to energy and clean water. A safety net for when things go wrong. For all 7 billion of us.

Second, keep within environmental limits: a zero carbon, circular economy, rather than the linear one we have now, with its straight lines from natural abundance to man-made waste.

And third, keep inequality from getting out of hand. Both income *and* wealth; within countries *and* globally; and in particular, recognising the need for fair shares of environmental space in a world of finite resources and sustainable limits.

But if the ‘what’ is relatively straightforward, that’s clearly not true of the ‘how’ – because the three objectives I just mentioned can often seem like an impossibly distant dream.

There are plenty of reasons why. The issues we face are massively complex. Our governments, with their single issue silos, were built for another age, and rarely get beyond firefighting the latest crisis. We’re in a multipolar world of sovereign states – who are obsessed with competing rather than cooperating. Our leaders don’t lead.

But I’ve come to think the biggest obstacles are about people, and power.

Power, because we see every day how climate deniers flush with fossil fuel cash can trump a 99% scientific consensus. Because we know all too well how easily vested interests can block national action through trade rules, or campaign finance, or simply by murmuring that they might relocate.

And people, because this *isn’t* just about corporate villains or corrupt politicians, as much as Naomi Klein might try to persuade us so. I’ve spent a general election in Labour’s campaign war room, and it made me realise that whatever else you may say about politicians, they *do* care what you and I think – obsessively so. And they see in us what we’re reluctant to face in ourselves: we’re not yet serious about a just and sustainable global economy.

Not really.

Sure, we’ll support a bit of aid spending, when times are good. We’ll recycle rubbish, or buy organic food. But we’re a long way from facing up to what it would really take to make a more equal world – tilting the trade playing field much more dramatically in poor countries’ favour, or allowing much more migration, or really embracing redistribution as a global principle.

Above all, we’re a long, long way from accepting that we need to “live simply so that others may simply live”.

So how do we overcome these formidable obstacles?

I think three things need to change.

First, we need a momentous shift in our *values*. A change towards:

- A larger 'us' – one that moves from “people like us” to “people – like us”.
- A longer future – beyond the next news cycle, the next financial quarter, the next election, instead looking out for generations to come.
- And a different good life – one that understands that security, wellbeing, and consumption are not three words that all mean the same thing.

The next thing we need to do is *organise*.

Think back to 2009. Remember how climate legislation looked all set to pass in the United States? The environmental NGOs had played a classic insider game in Washington – commissioning polls, running TV adverts, talking to the right people on the Hill.

But the Tea Party fought them with *a movement*. Besieging startled lawmakers at town hall meetings and fundraisers all over the country. You know what happened next. Climate legislation died horribly in the Senate. And not long after, the Copenhagen climate summit fell apart – with no targets, no timetables, and no global plan for 2 degrees.

We have to learn from this disaster. It's not good enough for us slide into Occupy Wall Street's comfort zone of thumbing its nose at the whole system of governance. We need a movement that's *better* than our opponents at forcing government to work for us.

And the third thing we need to do is be *ready*. For shocks and crises and moments when people are prepared, just briefly, to think the unthinkable. You all know the Milton Friedman quote, written to his fellow monetarists years before they took charge with Reaganomics and Thatcherism:

“Only a crisis, actual or perceived, produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.”

We've been so bad at this.

We missed the 1998 South East Asian economic crisis. The global financial crisis ten years later. Hurricane Katrina. Superstorm Sandy. Two food price spikes. Even now, we're doing it again with ebola – which should be a slam-dunk argument for massive investment in African health systems, rather than trying to use quarantines to pull up drawbridges that don't exist.

So what would readiness look like?

Partly, having policy ideas ready on the shelf. Thinking ahead not just about what's possible, but what's necessary. Imagining and developing the transformative policy changes we need to make a just and sustainable economy a reality.

But it's also about having the right stories ready. Stories that explain, in turbulent times, where we are. How we got here. Where we need to go. Most of all, who we are. Stories that are as grand as the crisis we face.

I think Jubilee has already proved itself able to be just such a story – and as I said at the beginning, we have unfinished business with our Millennium Jubilee. And I'd like to finish today by talking about the deeper idea that underlies the whole notion of Jubilees – the idea of *atonement*.

Like a Jubilee, atonement is about restoration. It's about reuniting things that have been torn asunder. At-one-ment. Recognising ourselves as part of a larger tapestry. A larger us.

But atonement is also about sacrifice – and from Jesus' ministry onwards, *self*-sacrifice. A powerful and subversive idea in a society grown sick on its own narcissism, when what we need to do is consume less, give more fully of ourselves, rediscover a sense of larger purpose.

If we go back to the very oldest parts of the bible, we find that God's first covenant with humans was not the one He made with Abraham, or Moses, or David.

Instead, it was the everlasting covenant – also called the covenant of peace, *šalom*.

This peace, God's peace, was always about much more than just the absence of violence. It was about wholeness. Holding together. The integrity of all of God's creation. It's the state of unity we find in Day One in the first chapter of Genesis. In Eden before the Fall. In the Holy of Holies inside Moses' tabernacle and Solomon's temple.

But the covenant of peace could be broken, through human ignorance and sin – *especially* when injustice is allowed to go unchallenged. The book of Proverbs pulls no punches: "Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity."

When the Covenant is broken, the whole of Creation becomes at risk of disintegration, as the tapestry starts to unravel. Isaiah knew this, describing the effects in terms becoming only too familiar to those of us who live in the 21st century:

"The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the heavens languish with the earth. The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes, and broken the everlasting covenant."

William Butler Yeats knew it too, when he wrote of what happens when

*"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere,
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity."*

To avoid these catastrophes, it was essential to heal breaches in the Covenant when they occurred – and that was what the process called atonement was for.

Atonement was the single most important role of the high priests in the first temple. So too with Jesus – whose ministry, as Paul tells us, has to be understood in the same light: as "the mediator of a new covenant" who "offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins".

And we, too, are called to that atonement role. From the very beginning, in Genesis 2.15, humans' role on Earth has been to "till and keep" it. And in Hebrew, the word for 'tilling' is the same as the one that refers to worshipping in the temple, while the word for 'keeping' comes from the same root as preserving right teachings.

So our role on earth is about much more than the slightly anodyne concept of stewardship. Instead, we were created as part of the original priesthood charged with maintaining God's covenant of peace. Not original sin, but original blessing.

And while, as Bishop Richard Chartres likes to put it, we then *chose the wrong tree* – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil instead of the tree of life that stood at the centre of the garden, whose fruits were not knowledge but Wisdom – part of our priestly ministry is to repair that breach – through atonement, Sabbath, and jubilee.

It's significant that the high priests of the first temple were anointed with a holy oil, which allowed them to see creation as it really is – a process of resurrection, as the theologian Margaret Barker¹ puts it, that was “not a post mortem experience”. The word Christ, too, means anointed one. And we, too, are anointed, at the moment that we're baptised into the Christian family.

So this is the moment. Now is the time for us to fulfil that role. By making the right changes in our own lives. By getting organised politically, to demand the future we want from those who stand in the way – something Tearfund is perhaps *uniquely* well placed to do, in the way that it's so often been a trailblazer for the rest of civil society. And by keeping faith even in the face of apparently impossible odds, recognising that we'll need plenty of help – and praying for it in the confident expectations of miracles.

¹ From whose work many of the ideas in this talk are taken – for a selection of her writing see www.margaretbarker.com or her books including *Temple Theology: An Introduction*