

EURODIACONIA 2018

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL EUROPE?

'Bread in the Wilderness: Departing from the zone of strategically designed suffering'

Thank you for your invitation. I come from the far western edge of Europe, from a state in which the very idea of Europe has caused a huge political crisis and may well cause a huge constitutional crisis in at least two of its constituent nations. My perspective and my stories are Scottish, but I am also in my heart a European, and I hope that at least some of what I say may speak to you as Europeans from many countries.

When I was a small child, I lived in the country. And I remember being told in Sunday School the story of Joseph and the famine in Egypt, and the seven thin cows coming out of the Nile and swallowing up the seven fat cows, and being quite sure that skinny, starved cows were going to come up out of the placid River Nith in Scotland and eat up the fat cows in **my** meadow. We interpret from where we are.

That was my first encounter with Joseph, most-loved and most hated son and brother, sold into slavery in Egypt, object of desire, interpreter of dreams, chief minister of the Pharaoh, and one of the great biblical heroes of my Presbyterian childhood formation. It was many years before I saw another, less heroic dimension of his story, a dimension of immense power and hunger and economics and monopoly.

Pharaoh is the embodiment of that power; his land of Egypt is the superpower, the breadbasket of the ancient world. But when he is asleep and unguarded, the most powerful man in his world has nightmares full of horror and portent. Desperate to understand his dreaming, as a last resort, he summons an unknown Israelite from prison. Joseph the Israelite, the interpreter, immediately recognises that the one with everything dreams of scarcity, of lack. These are dreams of famine. Hearing and receiving the interpretation, Pharaoh sets out to turn his nightmare into policy. He asks for a plan of action, and Joseph nominates himself as food czar. The royal policy is to accomplish a food monopoly; then, as now, food is a weapon and tool of control.

Genesis 47 describes this nightmare policy. All the Egyptian people, having no food of their own in this time of severe famine which had come upon Egypt, come to Joseph and pay their money in exchange for food. The centralised government of Pharaoh becomes even richer. In the second year of famine, the peasants come again and ask for food. This time, Joseph, on behalf of Pharaoh, takes their cattle, their means of livelihood. In the third year, the peasants still need food. But now they have no money and no livestock. This year, they surrender their freedom in exchange for food. They do it willingly, for they are desperate. This is how Genesis 47 puts it.

Shall we die before your eyes, both we and our land. Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We with our land will become slaves to Pharaoh; just give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate.

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other.... And the people said to Joseph: you have saved our lives; may it please my Lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh.

Joseph's service to the Pharaoh was very profitable for him and for his own people. They did well in the land of Egypt. But now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. The Israelites in their turn were oppressed and enslaved, ultimate victims of the system of fearful monopoly, always pressing cheap labour for more production. The scene is set for a great contest between the urge to control-the manipulation of the economy in the interest of a concentration of wealth and power for the few at the expense of the many- and the power of emancipation that is linked to the God of the Exodus. For the sake of the common good, it was necessary to depart the anxiety system that produces nightmares of scarcity!

I am quite unable to read this narrative as simply a long-ago story of a faraway place which rather bizarrely provided the inspiration for a popular musical beloved of British primary-school children. It has far too much contemporary truth in it! I used to work for Christian Aid, and the policy rooted in nightmare was evident every day of my working life. I saw the reality of what the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann describes as 'the predatory practices and aggressive policies that make the little ones vulnerable to the ambitions of the big ones.' (1) I know that 'in a rapacious economic system, nobody's house and nobody's field and nobody's child and nobody's oil are safe from a stronger force.' I see it in the price cartels and commodity speculation in grain today, I see it in the land grabs and appropriations and the forced evictions and demolitions, I see it in the people-trafficking and child labour, I see it in the resource wars over oil and water.

And I see it in Europe. Sometimes it feels to me as if everyone in Europe is angry about something! Political storms in Italy, constitutional upheaval in Spain, austerity measures in Greece, the rise of right-wing nationalism from Scandinavia to the Balkans, everywhere people are at odds with one another. Many take to the streets in frustration, families divide and all of it is magnified in the narrative of resentment that cascades from social media. In Scotland, where I live, there is a simmering anger as we face being forced out of the European Union against the expressed will of the considerable majority. In particular, those migrating into Europe have become scapegoats for the anger felt in communities which experience multiple levels of deprivation and political exclusion.

Sharing an ever-shrinking social cake, those immigrating are blamed for scarce jobs, housing, benefits and healthcare. Exclusionary practices and attitudes are not unique to one socioeconomic group or country - 'the flow of people is regarded with alarm in virtually every world capital', and governments have increasingly continued to close borders more tightly.

The perceived threat of terrorism compounds the situation. Those migrating are also often perceived to be responsible for other criminal activity and can be unfairly regarded as dangerous. In short, those migrating have become, 'symbolic bearers of a complex pattern of change, diversification and "loss" for which they are only the most convenient scapegoats.'

The global refugee crisis is the most immediate and visible manifestation of people who are pushed to the margins and beyond, and it is now affecting every part of Europe. We cannot have a social Europe if we do not recognise that we are intimately connected with a wider world. But uprooted and displaced people are not the only ones who live on the margins, and most are less visible. They might include: people with disabilities, victims of violence or crime, those experiencing unemployment or redundancy, homeless people, looked-after children, prisoners, sex workers. But marginalisation also affects people experiencing racism, homophobia, sexual and domestic abuse and extreme poverty. There is no country in Europe where these things don't occur.

For many, the marginal experience is one of death and loss. They experience themselves as locked-out; locked out of the world of happy families, successful careers, safe homes and streets, good health -all the things our consumer capitalism tells us are the desirable norm. A sense of belonging, of security, of identity, of at-home-ness can all be lost as we grapple with the pain of lost loved ones, lost homelands, communities or homes, lost health or jobs, and sometimes, terrible trauma. The anger of those on the margins masks often-crippling anxiety and profound fear.

And even those of us, still the majority in Europe, whose lives are safe and comfortable and enjoy the prosperity which the post-war European project has brought, are not exempt from anxiety and fear: for the future of our families and communities; of losing the many real social and political gains that being European citizens has brought us; of change that we have not sought and do not control. The story and the threat of loss is, I think, increasingly pervasive in Europe today.

The exploitative system of Pharaoh believed that it always needed more and was always entitled to more-more bricks, more control, more territory, more oil- until it had everything. Our immediate experience of the kingdom of scarcity is our entitled consumerism in which there is always a hope for more, in which we imagine that something more will make us more comfortable, safer, happier...Every day, we are being inducted into an anxiety system,

an ideology of deficiency, that produces nightmares of scarcity, a totalising system which is immense in its impact upon us. The spiritual challenges posed by this totalising system are profound.

And as we struggle with our own participation in the ideology of deficiency and the spirituality of economics which monopolises us, which precludes the common good and makes everyone into a master or a slave, a rival or a threat, we ask the question, 'what does it mean for us as Christians to be social in Europe? How do we walk together?'

We are all part of the globalised market economy now, whether we like it or not, and we cannot escape its influence. All the moral conflicts, all the competing desires which all of us experience, show up in extreme and visible forms in the market because the stakes are so high, and affect so many. Day by day, we live in a society which bombards us with the messages of the market economy:

- Value is always extrinsic. Nothing has value in and for itself, only for what it can be sold for. The market decides if we're worth it!
- This is reinforced by encouraging a disordered relationship between wants and needs
- Unregulated, it will always concentrate more and more wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people.
- Because it depends on competition, pushing down labour costs and resource control, it separates individuals from their land, communities and spiritual resources, but will then commoditise these.
- It will externalise costs as much as it can, often on to the poorest.
- In order to justify and legitimise its practices, which render millions effectively redundant to their societies, it will hold them as being responsible for their own exclusion.

It will do all this for the sake of a freedom and choice which is increasingly restricted to the few, and even for them is increasingly destroying other important human values. **If we do not think that this is a profound spiritual formation, we are deluding ourselves!**

We are all bound up in this global monopoly, we are all complicit, even in such apparently simple things as using our mobile phones or opening a bank account. But we need to think deeply about how we build resilience, discernment and the ability to say no in the face of this deluge? If there are no intentional, alternative forms of spiritual formation offered, the default position means that the ideology of scarcity, the system of monopoly, the nightmare of anxiety will rush in to fill the void.

Biblically, escape from slavery in Egypt, Moses' dream of departure from the zone of strategically designed suffering, as Brueggemann puts it, led into the wilderness. This was a

new environment of risky faith and the Israelites did not take long to regret their departure from the place of guaranteed food, even though it was a slave diet. The story of grace, of bread from heaven, was one of absolute strangeness, like nothing they knew. This bread could not be stored or monopolised; it went bad if you tried to stockpile surpluses. Yet the wilderness, they discovered, could be a place of viable life, made so by the generosity of God. The bread in the wilderness was a divine gesture of enormous abundance. It broke the grip of Pharaoh's food monopoly because it was enough for all but not more. It broke the pattern of violence that is rooted in a fear of scarcity. In the Bible, the feast at which all are included breaks the system of fear and anxiety and sets free the truth of generosity.

But what does this look like today? What does it mean to be a citizen of Europe, when both political and economic structures of citizenship are being widely and often aggressively questioned, and some of us, who hold our European-ness dear, must re-imagine our belonging from outside the European Union? How can we build and strengthen a European citizenship which includes those excluded by politics or poverty, a citizenship of the heart which restates the central values of peace, integration, human rights and environmental protection? Different national histories have created diverse and sometimes contested realities around civil society, and therefore the witness of churches and faith organisations is all the more important across Europe as a marker and statement of social solidarity.

In Romans chapter 12, having appealed to his brothers and sisters not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds in order to discern the will of God for what is good and acceptable and perfect, St Paul outlines the marks of the true Christian.

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

This could be a diaconal manifesto, difficult but inspiring. An excellent new publication called 'Becoming Human Together: a theological reflection on migration' jointly produced by Christian Aid Scotland and Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees, which I highly commend, suggests four practices by which we as Christians can walk together in the spirit of this manifesto in our age of fear and anxiety. The first is the practice of lament.

1. Lament

*Beside the streams of Babylon, we sat ourselves and wept,
Remembering the land we loved, and all the hope it kept. (from Psalm 137)*

The experience of migration is a powerful part of Scottish cultural memory and lived reality. Like many Scots, half of my extended family today lives in Canada. Our attitude to those who went as forced migrants is interesting. We think of them as brave, resourceful, heroic even. We are compassionate towards the plight that led them to leave-the famines, clearances, poverty and destitution they suffered- and we sing songs and write poems about the pain of leaving the glens and their loved ones behind, and about the hardships they endured in the new world.

*The many ships that left our country
with white wings for Canada.
They are like handkerchiefs in our memories
and the brine like tears
and in their masts sailors singing
like birds on branches.
That sea of May running in such blue,
a moon at night, a sun at daytime,
and the moon like a yellow fruit,
like a plate on a wall
to which they raise their hands
like a silver magnet
with piercing rays
streaming into the heart. (2)*

And when their descendants return to Scotland to visit, we welcome them with open arms and praise their achievements and their prosperity, the churches they planted as they took their faith with them. We believe that they had no alternative but to go, and we are proud of what they did.

Scots, however, were much less understanding of Irish migration **into** Scotland, which has greatly enriched our country, to the extent that the Church of Scotland a few years ago made an official apology for the racism which marked much of its dealings with Irish Catholic immigrants in the early 20th century.

Our great-great grandparents sang the same psalms of exile and return as the people of Israel, as refugees, exiles and forced migrants have done in many times and places. In this poetry we can hear the lament and the longing for a beloved land; but also, the rage of

powerlessness against the oppressors and tormentors, as a reading of the rest of Psalm 137 vividly demonstrates.

But migration is not a Scottish story, it's a human story! Every country in Europe has its memories, its myths, its stories of hope and suffering. Migration is part of the very fabric of the universe; the fact that things change and move and flow is their life. Try to make them static and you die of worry. Movement is also a central aspect of Christian faith. We cannot change that, we can only change how we relate to it.

Sharing our stories, weeping with those who weep is part of what it means to lament, whether that is with people who have been forced to migrate, or with those who experience political and social exclusion because of poverty or prejudice. But lamentation is more than just shedding tears.

'To lament means to call the bad bad, to protest against that which in any way contradicts or diminishes the good. Every act of lament is profoundly theological, in that every protest against what is bad is simultaneously a plea for what is good.' (3)

Reflecting on Israel as a community of intentional resistance to the oppressive power of Egypt, Walter Brueggemann identifies what he calls **liturgical resistance**, (4) the imagination of a free space outside the overbearing power of the oppressor. Through the regular re-enactment of the Exodus story, using poetry, sacrament, sign and drama, it provided a script for an alternative practice, which incorporated:

- (1) The public voicing of pain
- (2) A critique that ridicules established power
- (3) The song and dance of the women as a gesture of defiance

They imagined a holy ground where people were no longer defined by their powerlessness, their low status, their invisibility, but instead by their valuation in the sight of God. To lament is to affirm that every person, regardless of nationality, religion, status, gender or background is made in the image of God. It is an act of liturgical resistance.

2. Wrestling and Reconciling

The second practice my colleagues in Scotland have suggested is that of wrestling and reconciling. Here I quote: *To practice such wrestling is to choose to hold on through the division that is polarising our society, particularly around issues of migration. But we do not wrestle simply to prove our rightness or our righteousness. We wrestle to a place of understanding that equips us for reconciliation with those we disagree with or are fearful of. We hold on until the blessings of welcome, security and reconciliation are known by all.* (5)

One of the greatest challenges facing a social Europe is the anger and resentment which is evident in struggling and politically excluded poor communities, which can be too easily

manipulated by those with their own interests and turned against immigrants. This is a very ancient tactic-divide and rule, set the most marginalised groups in any society against one another, and attention will thereby be diverted from the underlying causes and systemic evils which prevent both communities from flourishing.

Today, certainly in Britain, and I think in other parts of Europe also, the ideology of deficiency can be seen most clearly in the notion that the poor are to blame for their own poverty - and hence indirectly for their country's economic problems-and that therefore it is only fitting that they should, out of their tiny household wealth, pay to solve them. The British government and media have sought to persuade the public that it is the fundamental moral defects of those living in poverty that is the cause of their situation. This has been done first by **individualising** the causes of poverty – making it an issue of morally deficient individuals – without any reference to the structural and systemic factors which in a neoliberal economy make poverty not only inevitable but essential.

Then those living in poverty have been subjected to a brutal **collective** cultural stereotyping, re-designated as the underclass, as feral, living in so-called 'sink estates', attending failing schools; thus, millions of people are deemed morally deficient, regardless of circumstance, in what has all the characteristics of a propaganda war on the poor, who are easy and powerless targets! The loser must deserve to lose. Otherwise we must question the game itself – and who wants to do that when you're the winner?

In Glasgow, an organisation called 'Bridging the Gap' does just that. Set up to bridge the sectarian gap in a poor community between Catholic and Protestant schoolchildren, they soon found themselves bridging another kind of gap -that between local people and people seeking refuge and asylum from many kinds of trouble. Together, they build community, wrestling with their differences but finding that in becoming human together, they are becoming reconciled.

We believe that costly reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. And as Christians, we are called to make this reconciliation visible – visible in terms of a quality of relationships, visible in terms of openness and hospitality. It is a visibility which serves the same purpose as Christ's visibility, namely, to reveal God and God's reconciling love.

To make reconciliation visible is often costly. It requires of us that we seek **to re-present the best vision and values of our various traditions and backgrounds**. We don't always know about the best of each other. Indeed, we don't even always know the best about ourselves, and sharing can help us learn both.

It requires us to engage in **a committed and respectful dialogue of equals**, which seeks to affirm our common ground, to dispel ignorance and prejudice, to struggle honestly with

significant areas of difference and to build creative relationships in which the memory of past divisions can begin to be healed by a mutual hope for the future.

And it requires that we practice **voluntary self – limitation**, in order to model the kind of political and cultural exchanges and possibilities we might hope for ourselves and therefore expect from others; whether that is self-limitation in consumerism, or in cultural and spiritual patronage.

3. Reciprocal Hospitality

One way in which Bridging the Gap builds community is through shared meals, and reciprocal hospitality is the third of the practices I suggest. It is remembered in the Iona Community that our Founder, George MacLeod, invariably used the following blessing at mealtimes: *Christ our Host, Christ our Guest. Amen.* This most succinct prayer is an excellent reminder that in thinking about a practice of hospitality, mutuality and reciprocity are built into its very existence and structure. This is first of all a practice of giving and receiving, of gift and grace.

It has been my experience, both in churches and community groups in Scotland, and in visiting refugee-receiving communities in Greece and countries outside Europe, that when hospitality becomes a two-way process, everyone is enriched. Reciprocal hospitality, very often first known in the sharing of food, is a kind of opening. I have seen and experienced myself in ordinary churches, the opening of space as sanctuary; the opening of time in practical arrangements, in listening, in accompaniment; the opening of minds in learning and advocacy; and the opening of hearts, which is an inevitable and unavoidable consequence of opening our doors to strangers who became friends.

The rejoicing of a private and exclusive community fails to invite all to hope. That is not the gospel. For God, no one is stranger. Every person – whatever his or her cultural, religious, racial, political, sexual identity – is known to God as an irreplaceable and incomparable person....to hope is to love your neighbour as yourself. (6)

Friendship - being alongside people, enjoying one another's company - happens wherever people share meals, watch through long nights with others, bear witness for them in bureaucracies, look after the children for a while, or simply offer an encouraging word or smile or shoulder to lean on. It happens when people respect another's wishes, preserve their confidences, protect their need for privacy, refrain from telling them how to solve their problems or live their lives. This ministry of presence and compassion, of reciprocal hospitality, is costly, practical, undemonstrative, and not the particular preserve of Christians, or of any one nationality or culture. It is perhaps the best flowering of our mutual humanity.

If love is to be the defining characteristic of our relationships, then I suggest that solidarity is its corporate or political dimension. Biblically, solidarity is the mark of the redeemed community as well as the changed individual. It incorporates both justice (right relationship) **and** mercy (going out in compassion to stand beside people in trouble just because of our shared humanity). The solidarity of Jesus raised people to their feet and stood beside them in defying shame, stigma, and oppression. In compassion and solidarity, he went where he had no need to go.

Real love refuses privatisation, requires the same principles to be practised in the public arena as in the personal. Jesus' teaching is never only personal. It also calls for the transformation of structures and institutions. Privatised faith makes no impact, offers no challenge to mainstream secular culture, because it does not exercise any kind of prophetic vision in it.

4. Pilgrimage

As Christians, we are not strangers but pilgrims together on a journey. Today, increasing numbers of people are walking the Camino, or travelling by many routes to sacred sites across Europe, including to Iona in Scotland. The ancient practice of pilgrimage can be a kind of prophetic solidarity with those for whom wars, climate change and devastating poverty has meant long and dangerous forced journeys.

'The pilgrim seeks to transgress all artificial borders that impede the quest for communion with God and with other people...We are first members of the body of Christ, a body that crosses and transgresses national borders. We are Christians first, members of an international, not merely national, body. Our pilgrim status makes the church a liminal body in any bordered national-state.' (7)

To act in solidarity, as Jesus did, involves our making the same considerable shifts that he did:

- from private faith to public witness
- from personal comfort to shared vulnerability
- from self-sufficiency to interdependence

This rather terrifying movement is a lifelong pilgrimage. But to be in solidarity must lead us to speak out clearly, act with courage and not to settle for sticking plaster to cover over the wounds. We may be tempted to keep quiet or to avoid problems for ourselves. To do that would be to display little faith when others are having to exercise almost unbelievable faith and hope and love. And we are not alone. We are pilgrims together.

In the midst of all our struggles is Jesus, saying 'Do not be afraid'. These words do not come from someone who had a comfortable life, an easy faith and a peaceful death. They come from someone who knew fear, loneliness and desolation, someone who wept and suffered

and struggled and at the end knew great doubt. His ability to bend and bind the elements was of no significance then. What mattered was not what he could bind, but what he had bound himself to. Of his own free choice, Jesus bound himself to suffering humanity, to the poor and outcast of the world, to the way not of power but of love, of peace and not violence. And at the heart of these, his binding of himself in trust to the mystery of God's love, which would always be faithful.

In John's gospel, the divine gift of abundance in the wilderness, renewed in Isaiah as abundance in exile, is represented as an abundance that will not go bad and perish but will live for ever. The ideology of anxious and fearful scarcity that is used to control and divide people from one another, that pretends it always needs more and is entitled to more, has always contested with God's offer of abundance, of a world in which there is enough for everyone's need, just not for everyone's greed. But the Eucharist, Christ's self-offering, is liturgical resistance, the great extravagant drama of the way in which the gospel of abundance overrides the claim of scarcity and invites to the common good. The story of abundance persists among us, offering us life in all its fullness, beyond ourselves, for the sake of the world. We have to keep telling the story, because we are all of us worth it.

© **Kathy Galloway**

June 2018

- (1) Walter Brueggemann, p25 in *Journey to the Common Good*, pub. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville 2010
- (2) Ian Crichton Smith, *The Exiles* (translated from the author's own Gaelic) in *The Exiles*, pub. Carcanet Press 1991
- (3) 'Lament in the Liturgy of the Rural Church: An Appeal for Recovery,' Paul A Baglyos, *Currents in Theology and Mission* 36, 2009, p253, quoted in *Becoming Human Together; a theological reflection on migration*, pub. The Church of Scotland/ Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees/Christian Aid 2018
- (4) This idea is explored fully in Chapter 6, 'Always in the Shadow of Empire' in *Texts That Linger, Words That Explode; Listening to Prophetic Voices*, by Walter Brueggemann, pub. Augsburg Fortress 2000
- (5) From *Becoming Human Together*, p9
- (6) Kosuke Koyama, from an address given at the 8th General Assembly of the WCC, Harare 1998
- (7) 'Introduction,' in *Christian Pilgrimage*, Avril Maddrell, Veronica della Dora, Alessandro Scafi, and Heather Walton eds., Taylor Francis Ltd., 2014, e-book. Quoted in *Becoming Human Together*