

“A call to the Government to hear the truth about poverty in the UK and to change its policies”

A sermon at Choral Evensong by The Revd Canon David Hodgson at All Saints Church Wokingham - Sunday 20th January 2019

Bible Reading: 1 Samuel 3.1-20

The reading we heard from the First Book of Samuel I find a charming story. Here are the first steps into his calling of the young boy Samuel who was to become the great prophet and judge of his people. Samuel as a youngster is given a message from God which is a heavy one to pass on. He has to tell his Master Eli that his family will suffer a punishing disaster because of his sons' behaviour which he Eli had failed to restrain. God had already given Eli this message but it appears he had not taken it on board. Now Samuel was called upon to tell Eli how things really were. No wonder Samuel, the young apprentice as it were, was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But fortunately Eli was ready to receive the news. Reading between the lines you get the sense that because Eli knew this already but had ignored it, the fact that God had taken the extreme measure of enrolling the young boy to speak up made Eli realise that this was a serious message he had to listen to.

It's not an uncommon experience today that sometimes it takes the voice or the actions of a child showing things as they really are, to make adults realise that they have been deluding themselves. Prophets of course as this example shows are not mainly called upon to forecast future events with no basis in the present - instead they are called upon to tell the truth – tell the people and tell those in power principally the reality of what is happening now and what will be the most likely outworking of that situation – unless change is made. The biblical prophets in their developed form always had an ethical dimension; they called things as they were in moral terms; telling about the injustices of their society; calling out about the suffering of the poorest and most vulnerable people. And, of course, they were not always given a favourable hearing by any means. Many of the powerful, then and now, do not want to hear what their activities, or their failures to act, are doing to the weak and the poor who are on the fringes of their concerns.

During last week I saw an interview on TV of some children who are living in poverty. They were part of a group of children and young people who had been to Parliament to explain to some of the MPs there what it's like to live in poverty. What truly struck a chord with me was how one of the girls, whose mother is a chronic epileptic and therefore was acting as a carer herself, described how it's impossible to concentrate on lessons at school when you haven't had enough to eat, and you don't know where the next square meal is coming.

A report of a visit to the United Kingdom, by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, in November last year found many examples of a worsening of life's opportunities for large swathes of our fellow-citizens since the financial crash of 2008/9. Here is an extract from the report.

“The costs of austerity have fallen disproportionately upon the poor, women, racial and ethnic minorities, children, single parents, and people with disabilities. The changes to taxes and benefits since 2010 have been highly regressive, and the policies have taken the highest toll on those least able to bear it. The government says everyone's hard work has paid off, but according to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, while the bottom 20% of earners will have lost on average 10% of their income by 2021/22 as a result of these changes, top earners have actually come out ahead.” And in another comment.

“Life expectancy rates have stalled in the United Kingdom, with the latest statistics showing a sharp drop in the annual improvement that has been experienced every year since the records began, and an actual drop for certain groups.”

The report concluded that this situation need not have been as bad as it is if alternative social and economic policies had been followed; and even now there are better choices that could be made. For example, particularly regressive measures could be reversed: including the benefit freeze, the two-child limit on child benefit (only partially lifted, still applicable to all future families), the benefit cap, and the reduction of the housing benefit for under-occupied social rented housing.

The really shocking events however were what happened after the UN report was published. Like the Church of England's carefully researched report "Faith in the City" in the 1980s, it was simply rubbished by senior Government ministers. The Rapporteur was accused of political bias, as I might be for highlighting this issue in a sermon. And instead of taking on board that there are very real problems of financial hardship for millions of people in this country and especially in particular regions mostly a long way from London and the south-east, Government ministers including the Prime Minister chose arcane and very particular statistics to try and claim that poverty and inequality in this country have been reduced over the last 8 years.

But it is not only international bodies who are calling out our Government and society for failing to care for the most vulnerable and marginalised. Only this last week a coalition of charities working locally and nationally gave a briefing to the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee which shows that tax and social security cuts since 2010 have *breached the rights to social security and to an adequate standard of living* This means that the UK is infringing the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (Articles 9 and 11) and the [European Social Charter](#) (Articles 12 and 13), both of which have been voluntarily subscribed to by the UK.

UK levels of state benefits are not sufficient so as to ensure an adequate standard of living. [Families on benefits](#) now have to live without 40% of their required budget, and there are [1.5 million](#) destitute people in our country. It can be shown and is shown in this and other briefings , research and reports that tax and social security policies since 2010 have not been justifiable in terms of the goals they were meant to achieve. They have not been proportionate, and the effects have been discriminatory. The weight of local government funding cuts has fallen on people at risk of harm, discrimination and disadvantage, and benefit sanctions have been harmful and largely ineffective.

It is not enough simply to rubbish such reports, or to ignore them, or to impugn the motivation and integrity of those who do the research and seek to establish the truth about the effects of policies, which even if well-intentioned in some respects, are having terrible effects.

The saddest thing about those children and young people who spoke on TV last week to me was that they seemed to accept that this was their lot in life, and they had so little sense of the rights and dignities due to them as citizens of a prosperous and democratic nation. That is an outrage.

Eli recognised that the voice of God, the voice of truth, was being imparted to him by this child Samuel. Would that the social and economic policy-makers of today in this country would hear those who are speaking the truth.
