

Poverty – Who Cares?

These goals – clean water for all; school for every child; medicine for the afflicted; an end to extreme and senseless poverty – these are not just any goals; they are the Millennium Development goals... And they are more than that. They are the Beatitudes for a globalised world.

In a world where so many people seem to have lost interest in Christian faith, we need to ask ourselves one simple question – ‘Why?’ Perhaps it is because the church has very often lost its own way. Particularly in the Northern Hemisphere, we have too often allowed ourselves to become obsessed with those things that we think are so morally important, at the expense of the things that actually matter. Is it possible that in losing our prophetic voice and in becoming obsessed with what goes on in the bedroom, we have lost the attention of the world? Is it possible that our failure to engage in issues of justice, serving the poor and reaching out to the marginalised, we have forfeited the right to be heard on any other issue? I think it might be. What is more, when we fail to stand up for the poor, we fail to stand up for God. Challenging words may not often be comfortable, but they are nevertheless very important:

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy .

The Millennium Development Goals are eight key objectives that range from halving world poverty to defeating the scourge of HIV and Aids are an attempt by the United Nations to unite the countries in the world in fighting injustice, starvation, hunger and disease. They are perhaps the most visionary and demanding goals to have flown from the UN. The goals are high, some would say too high – but surely the church must recognise that these are goals that could have been issued from God’s own heart? It might just be that the UN has played the role of prophet in their challenge to the world to:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development

These goals could truly change the world. If we, for a moment, allow ourselves to believe that change is possible, we might also become agents for

that change. Edmund Burke once said that there was no one as foolish as the person who thought they could not change the world because they could only change a little. The Millennium Development Goals may seem like an impossible mountain to climb, but for Christians they provide an opportunity to pray, to serve and to act.

Pray

These goals are not attainable by human effort alone. In September 2005, Gordon Brown commented that on then current trends, the MDGs would take 100 years to honour. And according to the World Bank, the cost of achieving the MDGs will be between \$40 billion and \$60 billion a year. In human terms, these are just not going to happen. But what if God is in this? What if he has presented his people with an opportunity to pray change into the world? It is certainly in keeping with his will and plan for the world that pain, disease and despair are eradicated. Is that not at least part of what we pray for when we ask God that His Kingdom might come, His will might be done?

In prayer, we open ourselves to God's priority, especially His charge to feed the hungry, to reach out to the poor, to bring aid to the widow or the orphan. By surrendering our will to God's will, we learn to serve His eternal purposes. Through prayer, our faith is strengthened, our hearts are humbled and our lives are transformed. Prayer encourages us to go out into the world and serve.

The MDGs present us with a remarkable opportunity to pray for the broken, the poor and the oppressed. But in praying, they present us with an opportunity to do something – not just something that will bring change on the other side of the world, but something that will bring change in our own communities, on our own doorsteps, in our own lifetime.

Serve

Poverty is close at hand. It lurks behind closed doors in Britain. We see it in faces that look like our own. Despite the government's valiant efforts, hundreds of thousands of children in the UK still live in poverty. The challenge to the church is not just to pray, tick a box and think we have played our part. It is to be committed to eradicating poverty and fighting marginalisation in our own communities and in our own streets as well as on the other side of the world. Of course we must pray, and give. But we must look at the MDGs as something more than a programme, a project or a pet morality crusade.

These goals bite at us. They are the unfulfilled promises and obligations that reach out hungry hands to those of us who have so much. They are the eyes of abandonment that ask us why we do so little. They are the cry of the mother at a graveside as she buries her young child; they are the silent emptiness of abandonment felt in the heart of the child who has buried his mother. They are the impossible longings of the might have been that spring

from so many young women whose potential was dashed and hope crushed because nobody cared enough to act. We must each choose to do something:

One of the wonderful things is how God depends on all of us, which is actually mind boggling because here you have God who is omnipotent and yet waits on human creatures to be God's partners and collaborators. Each one of us has a contribution, each and every one of us.

These goals call us to act. They call us to do something in our churches, in our communities and in our consciences that is a commitment to not only demanding an answer, but to being part of the answer ourselves.

Act

Lastly, the MDGs call us to act. To do something. To make a noise. To say enough is enough. This is not just a case of filling in a postcard and sending it to a politician. It is about that, of course, but it is about so much more. It is about recognising our shared humanity across this planet and being committed to being the change we want to see, then seeing the change we want to happen. This task demands our hearts, and our lives, but it is worth it.

The hope of a secure and liveable world lies with disciplined nonconformists who are dedicated to justice, peace and brotherhood.

We must act because justice lies at the heart of God and justice should matter to us. Augustine once said that charity is never a substitute for justice withheld. In all of our serving and praying, we must remember the command to act justly.

Explore, commit and do

Over the course of a series of articles, I want to explore the spiritual and theological significance of each of the Millennium Development Goals. I want to think out loud with you and ask some key questions, questions like:

- What does the bible have to say about this issue?
- How can I pray sensibly about this?
- What can I do to make a difference about this personally?
- How can I act in solidarity with others?

The journey may not be comfortable - but the best journeys are worth making because they take us to places where we have not been. Perhaps by engaging in this issue we will feel the touch of He who was hungry. Perhaps we will hear the voice of the One who has no clothes or shelter or home? Maybe the MDGs can be God's vehicle to change us as much as they are his means of changing the world.

Change starts right here...