

Talking Cents

June 2019

Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the church. Ministry Units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by Jean Brookes, a member of the Auckland Anglican Social Justice Working Group.

The wellbeing of the poor/the salvation of the rich

The May edition of *Talking Cents* reflected on the up-ending power of Easter Resurrection compared to the pragmatism of MMP politics. It asked how much poverty we are prepared to allow before we make long-term policy changes for the flourishing of all.

The New Zealand Welfare Expert Advisory Group (WEAG) released its report, *Whakamana Tangata: Restoring Dignity to Social Security in New Zealand* on the 3rd May, and the government presented its *2019 Wellbeing Budget* on 30th May.

As we examine the report and the budget, we continue to call for transformational socio-economic change. We are encouraged by Zacchaeus working inside a first-century Roman economic system and current religious and secular voices (Luke 19:1-10).

The Rev Dr Samuel Kobia, the then Secretary General of the World Council of Churches (WCC), preached a homily about Zacchaeus at an Inter-Faith Conference in Naples, Italy on the 27th October 2007. It was reproduced in *The Background to the Study Process of Poverty, Wealth and Ecology: The Impact of Economic Globalisation*, R. Mashana, WCC, 2007.

Following the 2012 WCC General Assembly a Panel for a New International Financial and Economic Order (NIFEA) was formed. Members have expertise in finance, economics, sociology and theology. They are appointed by the WCC, the Lutheran World Federation, the Council for World Mission, and the World Communion of Reformed Churches. In 2018, further staff were added and the Vatican joined the panel. The 2007 homily remains pivotal to this work. The following is my summary:

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector in Jericho, in occupied Palestine. In the eyes of many he had colluded with the enemy. He bought the right to collect taxes, and his profit depended on him being ruthless. His own people hated him and he hated himself as a treacherous son of Abraham. The crowd had no intention of making way for him when Jesus of Nazareth came to town. Zacchaeus was fired up by conflicting emotions. He ran ahead and climbed a tree.

Jesus had a special concern for the poor and depicted God on Judgement Day as among the poor, the hungry, the sick, the naked.... He also told stories about the lost, including the coin, the sheep and the son. Jesus calls Zacchaeus, the lost one, down from his tree and orders his household to urgently prepare hospitality for him. This action totally shocks the whole community. But Zacchaeus responds to the utterly unmerited friendship and graciousness of Jesus by taking an enormous risk.

Zacchaeus gave half of his possessions to the poor and offered to give to any victims of his cheating of others, four times the amount of the theft. Through his action, Zacchaeus breaks out of his guilt and isolation and publically re-affirms his real self, his better self. Zacchaeus' offer of reparation was a legal requirement of the time. The practice was designed to restore business capabilities to a defrauded party. But nothing in Roman or Jewish law required him to give half of his goods to the poor.

The world of Zacchaeus has many similarities to ours: a global economic order, a local inhabitant with power in the regional expression of that system and his community. Zacchaeus gave life back to himself and his household by reparation, restoration and the re-distribution of wealth.

“Wealth has important functional dimensions (allowing people to eat and have shelter), aesthetic benefits (allowing people to celebrate life and enjoy beauty, and relational nature (where material items are used for self and neighbour)” (*ibid* p6, Footnote 19, quoting David Miller).

In contrast, “Poverty is the lack of entitlements of the poor: income, land, health, education and water” (*ibid* pp 8-9, quoting Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize Laureate, Economics).

A lot of international and local work on wellbeing preceded the 2019 New Zealand budget including:

- New Zealand was an initiating member of the international WELL ALL (the Wellbeing Economy Alliance);
- two decades of work lie behind the Treasury's Living Standards Framework with its four Capitals of nature, social, human and financial;
- the May 2019 Community Wellbeing Amendment Bill restored local government's purpose of promoting the social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing of its communities.

The New Zealand government claimed that its May 2019 budget would take into account the wellbeing of society as well as Gross Domestic Product (GDP). We hoped that with the implementation of the Social Security Report and the Wellbeing Budget, we would see clear courageous signs of an intention to address income and wealth inequality.

“We need to believe in our ability to address the gap between the rich and the poor by imaginative alternative economic policies that end selfishness” (2018 research on what New Zealanders thought about inequality <https://thepolicyobservatory.aut.ac.nz/podcasts/peter-skilling>).

As the trade war between China and the USA hots up, we note the possibility that the government's *Budget Responsibility Rules (BRR)* could be dropped “in the event of a major

economic shock or crisis” (Rule 1). Meanwhile, on 23 May, the Minister of Finance announced a possible loosening of government debt levels for effect in 2023. However, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen, and beneficiaries need reparation and restoration now.

To share income and wealth equitably in New Zealand, we need to support many levels of work:

- the Ecumenical Plans for a New International Financial and Economic Architecture (<https://www.cwmission.org/3rd-meeting-of-the-ecumenical-panel....>);
- a focus on policy Outcomes, while maximising Opportunities for inter-generational wellbeing and flourishing through highly funded public housing, education, health and welfare services;
- through our belief in fairness we must challenge the government to implement the 2019 *Social Security Report* urgently, especially its recommendation that “*main benefits be lifted by between 12% and 47%*”, or the CPAG submission to the WEAG that “*core benefits be lifted by at least 30%*”;
- grass-roots alternative community-led socio-economic initiatives;
- space and resources for Mana Whenua to exercise rangatiratanga in relationships with the Crown and in the workings of crown agencies and NGOs.

We could measure our integrity in all the above by asking if we are doing better than “pretending to have policies of well-being while practising the economics of selfishness” (Bryan Bruce, facebook post 9/5/19).

[As] “churches we are called to bring good news to the poor, and prophetic truth to the rich and powerful” (*ibid*, p12). We challenge the government to restore income levels to the poor so they receive justice, and to share wealth equitably so that like Zacchaeus the rich are also saved.