

'Comment' in SPANZ, June 2009

It's natural to look for someone to blame for our current economic ills. The media have been bashing our financial institutions and their directors, and the marchers in London were clear about who they thought were the culprits with their chants of 'burn a banker'.

We all want to know what went wrong and see those who deserve it getting their just desserts. But more valuable in the long run will be an appreciation of the lessons that can be learned – because if there's any 'upside' at all to this crisis, it's the opportunity it gives us to reflect on our values and consider how to create a more sustainable future.

Along with doing all we can to support those hardest hit, putting the resources of our faith into the public square is one of the most important contributions we can make, as churches, to the crisis. Scripture has much to say about the factors that have brought us to where we are, and equips us to offer compelling arguments, vision and policy to the debate about the economy of the future. What can we say?

First we must stress that change is necessary, that 'more of the same' is not the answer. At the heart of the Christian gospel is the need for metanoia, and there are things about the present system for which we need to repent – all of us who have benefited from them, not just 'greedy bankers'.

We need to highlight the social dimension of the market. One root of our present crisis is that we have seen ourselves as autonomous consumers, using the market to satisfy our own wants without regard to the consequences for ourselves or others. Scripture stresses the importance of community and interdependence, with markets playing a vital role in preserving social harmony.

The Jubilee laws in Leviticus, for example, aimed to ensure that no one lacked the basic necessities of life. Community spirit was broken when even one member was on the breadline. Another threat to the wellbeing of the community was the presence of huge disparities in wealth, something the Jubilee also sought to redress. Interestingly, recent independent research by British academics Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett has demonstrated how narrowing the gap between rich and poor in a society produces a stronger and more stable community.

The 'sabbath' principle of taking a regular break from work and economic activity is worth revisiting – not least in the light of Government plans to allow employees to 'cash in' a week of their annual holidays. The loss of one day in the week when trading effectively ceased has not only had consequences for family life but signalled our shift to a fully consumer-driven culture. As current research is reminding us, 'wellbeing' and 'happiness' can never be achieved solely by 'consuming'. Theology has much to contribute to that conversation.

And what about the mantra that we must have economic growth? We have known for years that our planet is not resourced to enable all its inhabitants to have the standard of living we enjoy in the West, yet we have done nothing to cut back on our consumption. As Malcolm Irwin of the Salvation Army has recently argued, we badly need a 'theology of enough', which focuses on what we already have and what we can share. The planet is not ours to exploit but a gift from God which we hold on trust. Can we get more currency for the language of stewardship and gratitude over against that of greed and acquisition?

As some influential thinkers are pointing out, at root we are in a spiritual crisis which will need fresh solutions from fresh sources. Already we are seeing a return to the language of values – witness the speeches by prime ministers Rudd and Brown on the eve of the G20. Commentators are also talking seriously about how practically we can create a more sustainable and just global economy.

We in the churches have much to offer, too, and must be at the heart of the debate.