

Common Good – *George Browning*

When I grew up as a lad in Sussex my happiest memories are not of anything that I owned or achieved, but of experiences I shared in common, either with members of my fairly large family, or with the wider community. In the centre of our village was a ‘common’, the focus of much community activity from the annual fair to agricultural shows and various activities for children. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that I am shaped by what I shared in common with family and extended community during the formative years of my life.

Margaret and I have just come home from several happy weeks in the UK and especially from exploring some more of the canals that crisscross the country and the experience of walking some of our favourite paths that at times cut straight through private property and in some cases across the middle of fields.

The idea of the ‘commons’ has been part of the culture of most previous generations. It has only been in relatively recent times that capitalism has extended its reach into the privatising of almost everything, presumably on the assumption that assets, privately managed, are better preserved. Perhaps this seemingly unstoppable movement has also been encouraged in what I will argue is the mistaken belief, that human happiness and well being is best secured through private control.

The idea that existence can be compartmentalised (a necessary pre-requisite of privatisation), has developed in western culture since the Enlightenment. It has been supported by scientific research through which the interests and claims of one discipline have frequently been examined and valued without any necessary reference to other disciplines. This trend has tragically engulfed the debate on climate change where economic activity, especially the assumption that profits are in all circumstances good, has given comfort to political decision making in which science is excluded, or derided, if it seems that short term profit making might be put under extra stress.

However, in even more recent times, this understanding is being seriously challenged. The assumption or understanding that a relationship exists between all things is becoming an accepted norm in a range of sciences, as well as being confirmed through religious belief. Jürgen Moltmann puts it well.

According to modern mechanistic theory, things are primary, and their relationship to one another secondary and determined by natural laws. But ... relationships are as original as things.¹

The British scientist, James Lovelock, has coined the term *Gaia* to describe the totality of creation as a single living organism. In his book, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia, the Final Warning*² he draws our attention to the looming disaster, he asserts, is awaiting humanity if we refuse to recognise the consequences of human action upon all living things. The same dire warning is presented in many

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Creating a just Future* (London: SCM 1989) 59

² James Lovelock, *The vanishing face of Gaia: a final warning*, (London Allen Lane 2009)

books and writings, most poignantly in *Storms of My Grandchildren: the truth about the coming climate catastrophe and our last chance to save humanity*³ by one of the world's leading scientists, Dr James Hansen.

Francis Fukuyama, the author of *The End of History* and *The Origins of Political Order*⁴ argues that we human beings naturally cooperate with one another at the level of family or tribe, but have enormous difficulty cooperating with one another beyond these naturally binding relationships, relationships that have evolved out of the necessity of survival. The manifestation of current global human behaviour seems to confirm Fukuyama's hypothesis. We are very good at competing with one another for advantage in international trade, but we seem to have absolutely no inclination to partner with one another in solving challenges that have been created by the global community. In other words we have created a world which for all intents and purposes transcends the tribal, and yet our tribal instincts remain so strong that we seem incapable of rising above them, even when our intellect confirms the necessity of doing so.

Commons have historically been understood as a means of securing equity and strengthening community at a regional, or local level. The need for *commons* has now stretched beyond local or regional requirements to a global necessity, for it is now manifestly clear that a region or a locality, on its own, can no longer secure the health, wellbeing and security of its own people. The availability of fresh water, clean air, stable climate and food security are affected by others who may live a continent away. It is this provision that so far we have miserably failed to secure, but we must learn how to do so within this generation, or it will be too late. In other words, so far we have no obvious commitment to safeguarding the global *commons* upon which we all depend for our health and wellbeing. Recent global meetings called to address the perils of climate change in Copenhagen,⁵ Durban⁶ and Rio⁷ have been disappointing- to say the very least. There appears to be no political motivation to address these issues. Perhaps we should not be surprised. Those who represent us at a political level represent our tribal, and at best, our national interests. These interests are seen by national politicians to be in competition with other tribes or nations. Therefore when political leaders meet together their overriding consideration is the safeguarding of what they believe to be the self interest of their very small corner of the world. What is not politically understood is that global best interest is now self interest. Preserving the *global commons* – clean air, fresh water, river systems, fish stocks, diversity of species and a stable mean global temperature are in the interest of us all, and should be invested in by us all.

What does our faith have to say on this matter and has our faith been unwittingly subverted by the consumerist culture which dominates all our lives?

Over the last two years my own area of research has been the Sabbath principle. You will all know that the Sabbath requirement is the fourth of the Ten Commandments. In the Exodus 20 account the rationale given for the Sabbath is Creation. In the Deuteronomy 5 account the rationale is the Exodus. In other words Sabbath is somehow to be understood as the principle that undergirds both

³ James Hansen, *Storms of my Grandchildren: The truth about the coming climate catastrophe and our last chance to save humanity*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2009)

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order*, (London: Profile Books 2011).

⁵ Copenhagen Climate Change Conference December 2009

⁶ UN Climate change conference Durban 2011

⁷ Rio+20 climate change and sustainable conference June 2012

creation and redemption. Sabbath gains its name from the Hebrew, *sabat*, which is usually translated *rest*. However, contemporary understanding that rest is the opposite of work; indeed is cessation from work, is to misunderstand this principle. Essentially, *rest* captures the idea of relationship. *Sabat*, resting, reflects the presence of God to creation and similarly the presence of God to his people in the Exodus, the great act of redemption. *Sabat* is at the centre of the divine ordering of creation; because God is present, all of life is hallowed and blessed. Each individual can only be blessed out of its (his/her) relationship with the whole. Individual parts of creation are described as good, but the whole is described as very good.

In recent weeks I have been giving thought to the idea that commons, or common good, can be described as part of natural law. *Commons* are an outcome of the sabbath principle, the preservation of equity within the whole community, which I believe is part of the natural law. Thomas Aquinas described natural law as rational creatures' participation in the eternal law.⁸ If Sabbath is as Karl Barth asserts,⁹ the goal of creation, the celebration of relational life, then sabbath is part of the natural law, applicable to all human beings, believing or unbelieving. Sabbath belief implies that human beings must accept limits in their relationship with and exploitation of creation. We human beings are not owners of creation; we live in relationship with creation and with one another. It is through the acceptance of limits that we human beings allow for the possibility of *commons* and the *common good*. It is through the acceptance of limits that we enable a shared existence that exceeds private ownership or personal accomplishment. Unfortunately, a culture of 24/7, life without limits, assumes that we are *apart from* creation not *part of* it. This arrogant assumption runs directly across the idea of limits; thus making the possibility of renewing, or extending *common good* very difficult.

A short reflection on Ahab and Naboth will help illustrate the point (1 Kings 21:1-16). Ahab was influenced by the religion of Ba'al which means *owner*. Neighbouring his already substantial holdings was the small garden property of Naboth. Ahab made what he considered to be a reasonable offer for Naboth's land. What he failed to understand was Naboth's, or the Yahwist's understanding of land. To Naboth he was not the owner of his land and was therefore not in a position to sell it. His land was his heritage to steward during his life time and to pass on to his children in his death. The sabbath principle expressed through jubilee was that if such land were lost through negligence, ill fortune, or theft from the more powerful, it was to be returned in the year of jubilee, for no one, or no family could remain disinherited in the presence of the God who provides for all. This was a concept which Ahab was incapable of understanding. Unfortunately it seems a concept which the modern market is also incapable of understanding. If there is a patron of the modern market it is Ba'al not Yahweh. To the Yahwist individual human behaviour and action was always to be limited or curtailed if it was in conflict with the common good. We live in a world in which the opposite appears to prevail; common good is to be sacrificed if it is deemed to be in the way of private ownership, or the assumed rights of the individual. The following statement from the Church of England in 2005 is illustrative:

Humankind is easily ensnared in the culture of ownership. Even if it is understood intellectually that the world is God's, and the human role of stewardship means only to have

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1-11qq. 90 - 106

⁹ Karl Barth, *Systematic Theology* 111.4 (London T&T Clark, 2009) 34ff

stewardship under him, people can still be caught by the desire for possessions, which is by its nature voracious ... In the midst of this the Christian is called to stop: completely, properly for a period of time. Not just to pause for a breath before carrying on consuming, but to take a deep dive into God's peace.¹⁰

A tragic example of the inability to stop has been the recent abortive attempt to place regulations on the gambling industry, more particularly the poker machine industry. Certain facts are beyond dispute

- Australian adults lose on average approximately twice as much in gambling (at \$1000 annually) as the next nearest country in the OECD.
- The greatest single contributor to this gambling loss is poker machines
- Those who lose most are not the so called high rollers, or people on professional wages, but those who represent the less prosperous segment of society.
- The tragic consequences of these losses flow well beyond the individual to the families and dependents of those who gamble in this way
- The social cost to our society or to the 'common good' is very substantial.

Despite all of this, a successful campaign was launched by those who have a vested interest in the industry, including political interest, to convince the general public that what is manifestly in the interest of *common good* is in fact not in the interest of the common good at all!

I would like to turn for a moment to the central tenet of the Christian faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's redeeming activity. I have earlier pointed out that in the Deuteronmic Decalogue, the *raison d'être* for the sabbath is said to be God's action in redemption, redemption that has little to do with the individual, but is about the whole people of God, or more properly the whole created order. Individual redemption comes into focus not for any reason, merit, or right of the individual, but through the individual's belonging to the whole creation people that God loves.

Arguably the most famous verse on the New Testament is John 3.16, *God so loved the world that...* Through the death and resurrection of Jesus a new redeemed community is formed in and through which there is no more division, no bond and free, no male and female, no Jew and Gentile. In this new community peace reigns not because enmity ceases between opposing factions, but because there are no opposing factions, there is only one community. Sadly the focus on God's redeeming activity for the sake of the whole creation has been somewhat overshadowed by a focus on the salvation of the individual. Since the reformation and especially since the influence of Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity, has made much more of an emphasis upon the individual than is warranted in scripture and certainly far more than was understood in the early days of the Church. William Temple that great Archbishop of Canterbury captures it this way:

No object is sufficient for the love of God save the world itself. Christianity is not one more religion of individual salvation, differing from others only in that it offers a different road to

¹⁰ Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Sharing God's planet*, (Church House Publishing London 2005), 27

that goal. It is the one and only religion of world redemption. Of course it includes a way of individual salvation, but its scope is wider than that, as wide as God's love.¹¹

Norman Wirzba makes the same point: "We need to move beyond the highly individualistic notion of salvation that many of us assume. It is important to understand that the Church early on worked precisely to combat this tendency".¹²

Emphasis on the individual has led many, most famously Lyn White junior¹³ and Max Weber¹⁴ to claim that Christianity has itself been responsible for tendencies that have worked towards a capitalism that is devoid of ethics and is largely antithetical to the common good.

My own view is that both White and Weber have important points to make, but over state their case. Moltmann asserts: "It was the Renaissance which first deprived nature of its rights and declared it to be 'property without an owner'".¹⁵

Post the Reformation, Christianity was influential in asserting that individuals should aspire to increased prosperity and well being and should not simply be pawns of an institution, be it the monarchy, the church, industry or politics. However, Christian influence assumed a moral undergirding, namely: individuals should prosper and have the right to improve their own lot, but only as a consequence of making a contribution to the well being of others. What has happened in the last three decades, at least, is that Christian values and Christian influence in public discourse has effectively ceased. Capitalism, separated from its moral underpinning, is not so much immoral but an ethics free zone. Profit can be made whether or not it contributes to others, or worse, even if has been made at the expense of others.

We now live in an economic environment where a lot of money, indeed a significant percentage of the total economic activity in countries like Australia and Britain is made without any connection to production, or the improvement of the lot of others. In the market, through processes like short selling and leverage, large amounts of money are made, or lost, simply by gambling that the market is going up or down. This activity, on a large scale, can become the reason why the market moves one way or the other. The market then ceases to be a true indicator of real value. Following the economic crisis of 2008/9 one would have thought that activities such as these and of course the practice of lending sub-prime mortgages would have been stopped through regulation and that banks would have been forced to serve their customers first and their share holders second – apparently not.

The Christian faith is essentially about the common good. This is because we believe in a relational God who has created a relational world. A world in which a few prosper while the aspirations of the

¹¹ William Temple, *Reading is St John's Gospel* (London: Macmillan, 1959) 48

¹² Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*, (Grand Rapids: Brazon Press, 2006)., 45.

¹³ Lyn White, "The historical roots of our ecological crisis." *Science* 155 (10 March 1967): 1203-1207. <http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf> (accessed 13 November 2011).

¹⁴ Max Weber. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (London: Unwin University Books, 1930).

¹⁵ Moltmann, *Creating a just Future* 68

majority are sacrificed on the altar of individual rights is not a world that receives biblical comfort. The biblical view is that because we are relational beings it is through and because of the common good that we will flourish as individuals.

An argument consistently put by those who champion a free market, a market unfettered by regulation is that wealth created will always trickle down to the advantage of all. It is true that throughout the world a large number of people have been pulled out of poverty. However, the last decade has, I believe, shown this argument to be false.

- The wealth gap between nations has increased
- The wealth gap between the highest wage earners and the lowest is at obscene and unprecedented levels.
- Growth in most of the industrialised world in the past decade has been an illusion; it has in fact only been achieved through debt, a burden which some countries are finding impossible to address.
- Growth, even in Australia, is only possible through an increase in the population, a strategy which clearly cannot continue indefinitely, even assuming it is wise in the short term, which is highly debateable. (Increasing the population to cope with a burgeoning quantum of aged people is only to inject another generation into the cycle. This increased population will itself age and need a further injection to cover it – ad nauseam.

I would like to conclude by suggesting some areas in which Christian influence could and should be more assertive as we seek to protect the interest of ‘common good’.

- The mantra of exponential growth at any cost should be challenged. It should be challenged on moral grounds because of the inequity it produces and the unmeasured debt left to the environment. It should be challenged on economic and ecological grounds as being simply undeliverable. Resources that produce wealth are not infinite. There are now several economists who argue for what is being called a ‘steady state economy’.¹⁶ A steady state economy challenges the presupposition that increased wealth is the appropriate goal. A steady state economy starts from a different proposition. It assumes that well being has more to do with relationships within community than increased private ownership. A steady state economy would use very different measures for GDP than the arbitrary measurements currently used. A steady state economy would certainly measure volunteerism, and the contribution made within families in the care of their elderly and disabled. It would measure educational and health improvements. It would also measure the losses experienced each year as a result of resources that have been mined and are therefore no longer available.
- Greater honesty should be insisted on from politicians, on all sides, in relation to the health challenges facing the community. The reality is that a combination of longer lives, the availability of expensive medical procedures, the prevalence of chronic conditions such as diabetes and obesity, and an increasingly anxious society is now making the gap between people’s expectation for health delivery and the budget available to fund it impossible to

¹⁶ Jeffrey Sachs, *Common wealth; economics for a crowded planet* (London Penguin 2008). Tim Jackson: *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a crowded planet* (London: Earthscan 2009)

bridge and facing almost certain collapse within a decade or so. For the good of society greater effort must be given to the empowerment of people for their own health options and quality of life.

- The environmental debate desperately needs the voice of mainstream Christianity. The debate has reached a farcical situation which can best be described as tragic.
 - a. The campaign to deride peer reviewed and very careful science is unprecedented: instigated by vested interest in the mining industry, right wing shock jocks and sympathetic politicians, it has been very successful.
 - b. As each year goes by the consensus of science that we face a crisis not only grows, but the seriousness of the situation is making previous estimates sound conservative.
 - c. Extreme weather events all around the world are a sad confirmation of scientific predictions. These events are not likely to abate, on the contrary, their frequency and intensity is likely to increase and the expense involved in dealing with them far outweighs the cost that would have been needed to respond appropriately when the crisis was first understood.
 - d. Despite all the statements to the contrary, the fact is the average world temperature continues to increase, with eight of the ten hottest years ever recorded occurring since the year 2000.

Political resolve, on either side of politics, will not match the level of decision making required for the sake of future common good, unless there is a much clearer demand from the general population that this is what we all demand.

The common good is at the heart of Christian belief because we believe we are fulfilled and enriched through our relationship with God, one another and the whole created order. At this time, when western Christianity continues to be in decline both in terms of church attendance and in terms of influence in public discourse, the tendency has been to embrace a strategy focussed on individual salvation and individual membership. While such a strategy must always be a part of the Christian mission, it should occur within the context of God's sovereignty over and within all things and of the embrace of the Kingdom of God which delivers the common good. The Billy Graham Crusades of the late 1950's were successful because they occurred within the context of maximum Christian influence and notional membership. Sadly this is no longer the case. Bishop Lesslie Newbigen¹⁷ noted that since the enlightenment two worlds have developed; the private world and the public world. He further noted that Christianity has not simply been pushed, but has retreated into the private world of gender, sexuality and personal morality. For the Church's sake, but more particularly for the world's sake and for the sake of the kingdom of God it is necessary to return to the place that God in Jesus has placed the divine agenda – nothing less than the public world, the place of Common Good.

¹⁷ Lesslie Newbigen, *Foolishness to the Greeks: the Gospel and Western Culture*. (London: SPCK 1986)

