

Is the Euro the new Babel?

Commentators are many and varied in apportioning blame for the current debt crisis in Greece. Some argue that the fault lies with the whole concept of the Eurozone, seeking to combine 17 quite different economies into a single currency. Others suggest that the problem is rooted in what they claim to be widespread corruption and tax evasion within the country's financial systems. Alongside this, it is being increasingly suggested that this is the outcome of a political system which has courted popularity amongst the electorate and developed an expectation of unrealistically generous public services and subsidies, given a false legitimacy through the implications of being a member state of the European Union.



For Christians, seeking to make sense of the world in which they live, this story raises many questions. For as long as I can remember, there have always been some who have pursued the theological argument that any coming together of European States represented a form of apocalyptic alliance that would attract Divine reaction. Much of this has been founded on some rather speculative readings of Revelation and Daniel, but there is a more foundational narrative which casts some probing shadows over the present situation.

However we interpret the Genesis story of the Tower of Babel, it is intended to convey to us a picture of human society which has over-reached itself; where confidence in human achievement has usurped any sense of obligation or accountability to the Divine. If we take the story at face value - this is the reason, we are led to understand, why humanity is separated out into different nations, their diverse languages and cultures preventing any similar attempts to create another cult of human achievement. Taken at its most literal, we might argue therefore that distinct nationhood is part of the Divine order, and is not something that we should seek to overcome through diminishing it to a state within a centrally controlled and regulated Union.

Many would say that the world is increasingly returning to speaking a common tongue, the rise of the internet being the latest stimulus for learning English. But if there is an even more widespread common language, it would have to be the language of economics – every nation it seems is bound in a complex web of credit and debt, which appears to have become so deeply embedded into our world order that we struggle to know quite who owes what to whom. The dispersal of Babel, it seems, is becoming increasingly reversed, and the God of economics is demanding that we build an ever increasing tower of credit and debt as a sign of our unflinching allegiance and our increasing dependency on financial gain. We might be tempted to argue therefore that the eventual collapse of the Eurozone is both inevitable and Divinely decreed. This may or may not be true, but either way this is no time for callous indifference, which sadly such ideas often seem to spawn.

It is interesting that as David Cameron holds out for Britain not being involved in any bail out, the ensuing debate is a largely economic one. The wisdom of his stance seems to be based on whether or not the Greeks do go under, and how much of the debt to UK institutions will, as a consequence, need to be written off. Is it better to throw a few million Euros their way rather than risking billions in unpaid debts?

No-one it seems has any appetite for any moral arguments about whether we have any responsibility or concern for fellow human beings whose lives are being increasingly blighted by this situation. But the moral arguments ask us some deep and penetrating questions:

There is little doubt that the protests in the streets, owe their existence, at least in part to a lack of realism on the part of the Greek people. It is a similar lack of realism that I see all too often displayed by the British electorate – whatever system we might devise, politicians are put in place by popular consent, and from this basis we seem to assume that

this gives us a right to expect that they only do what is popular. Government is not the political equivalent of Big Brother, where those who aspire to receive our votes need simply to entertain and amuse us. It requires tough decisions, and thinking that extends beyond mustering sufficient votes to get through the next election.

The circumstances which the Greek people fear themselves being plunged into will, at their worst, still be significantly better than those which face millions of people around the globe. The slum dwellers of our world cities, the exploited sweat shop workers and the subsistence farmers of the developing nations, are the real bail-out merchants. Without their willingness to continue to provide the goods we crave, selling their labour at prices which leave them locked in abject poverty, this entire economic system would, I suspect, quickly collapse. Indeed, I would suggest that it is the growing aspirations and desire for greater equality on the part of the world's disadvantaged that is causing the increasingly evident fault lines in our economic order.

The lessons of Babel are not that a sense of common humanity is intrinsically wrong but that this needs to be expressed through shared responsibility for each other's well-being, and not simply by being driven to build ever increasing epitaphs to our own sense of self importance. Events in Greece and the shadows which they cast over the economies of all the European nations, might indicate that this is a reality that we will sooner or later be forced to embrace. We buy and sell footballers for millions, while paying exploited children a pittance to make replicas of the boots they play in. This reality will not change without significant pain for those of us who enjoy the privilege of sitting at the top of this particular economic food chain.

It is perhaps because of this that the more informed economists are beginning to re-couple issues of growth and financial policy with matters of ethics, social responsibility and altruism. These are themes which are familiar to faith communities and have often been articulated within the world of business and commerce by organisations like ICF - the significance of this task is becoming increasingly evident. It reflects an approach that may be considerably less lucrative in the short term, and in some circles be viewed as naïve and old fashioned, it may even be unpopular, but the alternative is not looking good.

Phil Jump

ICF Vice Chair, June 2011

God of all humanity

Help us to live in our world as true citizens of your Kingdom

Help us to see the needs of others

Not simply in terms of how we might be affected

But as that which affects fellow humanity

And the well-being of a world that you have created.

Even when we feel trapped and implicated by the systems which shape and control our society

May we never lose the desire to ask questions and strive to make things better.

Help us to never simplify issues, and so fail to see the wider challenges that exist,

And may we never make them so complex, that we believe there is nothing we can do make things different.

Forgive the wrong that has been done

Provide the courage and confidence that is needed

And help us to build a world

With your Kingdom at its heart.

AMEN

Be with the people of Greece

As they face circumstances which many will feel are not of their own making.

Grant wisdom and courage to those who are appointed to lead them

Compassion and concern to the nations that stand at their side.

Help them to address that which is wrong;

Strive for that which is good;

Implement that which is wise;

And accept that which is necessary.

Through Jesus Christ, Lord of all things

AMEN