

The Theology of Social Action

Notes from a talk by Professor Andrew Bradstock of Winchester University at the National Rural Officers Gathering November 2019

Read more about Professor Bradstock's interests and publications [here](#)

Why Theology?

AB began by suggesting that churches are often not very good at linking social action and theology. Social action has been a major part of catholic teaching tradition and AB mentioned a book co-authored by Malcolm Brown ([Social Theology: Renewing the Vision Today](#)), but on the whole he said that churches are very good at doing social action, and in hundreds of parishes churches make a real impact, but the theology is sometimes an add-on.

As churches see a problem in their community they get on and do something about it, whether by setting up a foodbank or addressing local transport need. The approach is generally to address the need first and think about the theology later. He asks "Is it necessary to have a theology to meet a need?"

There is an argument that the theology is best done after the practice as part of the reflection, but theology is also part of the action. A dialogue between the two is needed the action and the theology go together. It is important to do the theology if we want our work to be authentically Christian. The theology is the "soil" – the action may be good but in what sense is it Christian? Theology can also motivate and give shape and content to our work, help us to find our distinctive contribution in social action, demonstrating faith and giving us new ideas and insights into how to go forward with action.

Life

Social Justice is based on the idea of all people being created in the image of God – all brothers and sisters in Christ. AB says this says something different from saying everyone has the same human rights.

Social action can be linked into Christian life – bringing the foodbank into liturgy and prayers for example.

He says that the bible does not give a set out theology of social action – but does give glimpses. We begin with God and what we know about Him. God affirms life – and life in the here and now. He is Provider, Liberator from what restricts fullness of life and Sustainer. He is Trinity – Holy Spirit, Word Incarnate, Creator God.

The rules and norms of Leviticus are for the promotion of fullness of life. Teaching on the Sabbath is to enable people to develop a better quality of life – it is not intended to be heavy but life affirming. The Jubilee proclaims a year of the Lord's favour. Debts are to be forgiven and land returned. The Jubilee is given to enable society to operate on a just basis. It is all about life.

But in the OT God is not always the author of life – not without bloodshed – for example in the Canaanite genocide or the flood. But it is important to ask where God is in these stories. In Exodus God is with the Israelites. On the cross – God is himself other cross – not with the Romans.

Being for life must be at the heart of our social action. And not just life as the opposite of death. Jubilee is about changing the condition of society so that people weren't permanently without land, or enslaved or in debt. Its aim was to restore people who had been in hard times so that they didn't need charity.

The bible always has a bias towards the margins, the poor and justice. God has a special place for people on the margins.

The life we speak about is life for individuals and individuals in society – we are our sisters and brothers.

God's people believe no-one should be excluded from the community on account of their economic circumstances. If everyone is of equal worth in the eyes of God then everyone should be able to live a life that reflects that structure. Looking out for the Jones's – not keeping up.

The kingdom on earth

God is deeply interested in our world. He created it and cares for it. There is a belief that God is mainly interested in the spiritual life of the world and saving souls for heaven. But God is concerned with all the worlds. Thinking otherwise can lead to the idea that this world is not important and that only "after death" matters – AB said "earth is not an airport waiting lounge".

The bible says that God is fully concerned with redeeming this world – ref Rom 8 and Revelation. God dwelt with man in Jesus. Jesus taught us to pray Thy Kingdom Come on earth as it is in heaven. How could God have shown more concern for our messy history than becoming incarnate in it?

Jesus's resurrection is considered the first fruits of the general resurrection. The first fruits of the Kingdom breaking in. We are compelled to work for the kingdom which is breaking out.

We are living in the in between – now and not yet. Jesus is the image of the invisible God. His whole ministry is profoundly life giving. Ref John 10.10 and life in all its fullness.

Jesus released people from all that hindered their life in all its fullness breaking down all barriers including those relating to health, mind, culture, oppression, emotion, guilt, and legalism.

New life in communities as well as individuals

When people came to Jesus he gave them hope but he also showed how new life also comes to communities. His ministry is about new people in a new society. He advocates a new way of relating to one another in peace-making, compassion and justice.

Example – Zacchaeus – an example of a meeting between Jesus and Zacchaeus which benefitted Zacchaeus, built also the whole community and Zacchaeus changed and gave back to his community and the feeding of the 5000 – each person was filled but they were also bonded into a sharing community. Life in all its fullness is about individuals and community benefitting together.

Jesus brought a new way of seeing and meaning and purpose. The concept of Shalom includes ideas of wholeness, integrity and wellbeing. AB says this is the kind of life as found in the teaching of Jesus.

Distinctively Christian

Jesus was involved in our world as he found it and he gives us the model for our social action. Therefore, sometimes we have to challenge culture and the status quo – challenge the values of society when they are leading to death rather than life in all its fullness.

God in Trinity enters fully into our history in order to bring life with a particular emphasis on those who are closer to death in whatever way. And this gives us our mandate.

We do social action for its own sake. It is not the same as evangelism. We want people to feel life in all its fullness and this includes meeting Jesus, but we do this work primarily because we love people. But in doing so our lives can show our faith – explain why we do what we do – and show Jesus.

In terms of the distinctiveness of our social action from some other agencies – on the basis of bringing life we may do things differently. We are less likely to see targets and numbers than people made in the image of God.

AB referenced the Martin Lewis quote about the CAP – debt agencies are functional. The CAP will come to your house, give you many hours, care for you and help you along your way. In Christian social action we have time to “waste” with people.

In practical terms Jesus always asked people what they wanted – as effective for us now rather than offering what we think is needed. Jesus also always went to where people were and our most effective social action comes from going to where people are and listening. Not expecting people to join our conversation but joining in theirs.

Jesus was about promoting justice not just in the short term but making real fundamental changes for people and communities. So – we may run a foodbank – but we also need to be working for the situation where we don't need a foodbank. We need to be thinking how we can drive change. God wants real change not small change.

God works for the common good – being present in communities and helping people to realise their potential and gifts. So our action must involve helping people to contribute and not only offer things and services.

AB concluded with the reflection that the Gospel is personal – but it can never be private.

Other books/reports on the social action theme:

[Journeying Out Ann Morisy](#)

[Beyond the Good Samaritan Ann Morisy](#)

[For Good Sam Wells et al](#)

[Faith in Foodbanks](#)