

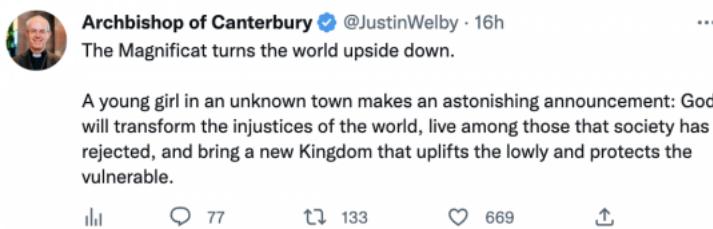
The radical economics of Christmas

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It only took a tweet from the Archbishop of Canterbury for me to break my promise to stop writing for Christmas. [This was the resulting thread](#):

Justin Welby, as Archbishop of Canterbury, was pontificating on Twitter yesterday. I noted he said he said 'The Magnificat turns the world upside down'. I agree, it does. So trust me, this is all about economics, and why the Church is failing on this key issue. A thread....

This [was Welby's tweet](#):



Archbishop of Canterbury  @JustinWelby · 16h
The Magnificat turns the world upside down.

A young girl in an unknown town makes an astonishing announcement: God will transform the injustices of the world, live among those that society has rejected, and bring a new Kingdom that uplifts the lowly and protects the vulnerable.

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Now, let's look at the key bits of the Magnificat, which is from Luke 1:46-55, and so very much part of the Christmas story. For those not familiar, set to music it is part of standard, everyday, Church of England evensong, and so should be said or sung every day in church.

The Magnificat is in four parts. It is the third, critical, part to which Welby seems to be referring. I quote this in the next tweet, using the Book of Common Prayer version:

He hath shewed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.

This is radical stuff. It is Mary's summary of what she thinks the mission of Jesus will be about said before he is born. Now, of course you can doubt that, but the point is that this is right there at the start of the Christian story. It is what Luke thought it was about.

And to reiterate the point, Luke returns to the theme when discussing what Jesus said he thought his own ministry would be about when giving his first ever public ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth. In Luke 4: 18-19 he said (next tweet):

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

That's the Christian manifesto. But some care is needed, because some of the meaning has been hidden by translator's. Who are the oppressed? Debtors are. What is the year of the Lord's favour? That is a Jubilee year when in Jewish law are debts were wiped clean.

Jesus was clear in the original language: as the Magnificat foretold his mission was to declare radical economic transformation by liberating poor people from debt.

This is also reflected in the Lords' Prayer. Many will be familiar with this, also found in Luke. The core economic messages come in three ideas: 'Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.'

So, we have a right to survive. I agree, we do. But the bit about trespasses is more interesting. The Church often interprets this as sin. But the original text can be translated as debts. So, forgive us our debts, as we forgive those who owe us. That's what this was really about.

And that is clear too from other teaching. His actions in the Temple made it clear how Jesus viewed those who traded on religion. My favoured version is from Mark (next tweet):

When they arrived in Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began to drive out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those selling doves.

This was not Jesus 'meek and mild'. This was Jesus the angry, social and economic revolutionary in action, willing to upset the powers that be and those that made the money that kept them in positions of power. No wonder they killed him.

So, Welby is right: the Magnificat did change everything. Whether Mary said it or not does not matter. What it did do was frame a radical economic philosophy laid out by a man called Jesus of Nazareth.

That narrative was proclaimed with the intent to overthrow the economic and social order of the day, with the explicit goal of bringing down those with economic power that would then be transferred to the poor. That would have changed everything. So they killed him.

Now let's roll forward to the present day. The teaching written in the first century still has a massive impact on the world, even if the number of active Christians in the UK is relatively low. But is that surprising when the Church doesn't teach what the gospels said?

All those references to economics got quietly forgotten as the powerful adopted Christianity as a tool to advance their own causes. References to debt got replaced by references to sin. So much better as a means to keep a population under control, until contraception ended that.

And far from bringing the mighty down from their seats of power, the Church upholds them. If you doubt me, tell me why it is that Welby will crown Charles III next year? If ever there was a proud man needing humbling it is our king, but Welby will even declare him his boss.

And far too often the likes of Welby (Eton, Cambridge, the City and then ordination) seem (I stress, seem) to put more value on links to wealth than they do the need to transform society for the benefit of the poor.

I always remember a previous Dean of Ely telling me it was his job to wine and dine to raise funds to keep the cathedral going. I believed him. He was good at it. But it made me question the whole point of the Church to whose fabric but not meaning he was dedicated.

If Welby really believed that the Magnificat changed everything then he would be supporting striking workers, and he would be challenging the Bank of England on interest rate rises. He would be saying increased taxes on low earners are wrong. He would be calling for wealth taxes.

He would not care what Tory MPs say. His real boss would, I am quite sure, be overturning tables right now. And the bishops can do this. They are in the Lords after all. But I rarely hear anything like that.

They are good on Rwanda policy, I agree. But on economics that might bring down the mighty? The grade given has to be 'poor'. And that is on the issue that is their whole reason for being for heaven's sake (almost literally, for once).

You don't have to do God to think the established Church is failing in its purpose. Anyone can see that. I'll declare my own position though: brought up by active Anglicans I am a Quaker, because I couldn't see the point of the CoE when it does not

walk its talk.

So, this Christmas what I want is that the Church start talking about the necessary bias to the poor that it must evidence in everything it says and does. If it has a role it is to champion the cause its founder lived and died for. Is it too much to hope that it might do that?