

Stand Up – Take Action Against Poverty Micah Sunday 18 October 2009



Just theology ...

The issues of global poverty are increasingly being seen not just as charity or humanitarian concern, but as issues of global justice. It is no longer just a matter of people in Africa or Asia who live in primitive conditions because that is their culture, or who have been hit by flood, drought, cyclone, earthquake or other disaster. Globalisation, and being a part of the global economy has actively made things worse for many of the poorest.

The Bible has an enormous amount to say about our responsibility for the poor. For *Micah Sunday 2009* we invite you to focus on the Lord's Prayer, and the implications of praying this prayer as rich Christians living in the West. Use the following article either as the basis for a sermon, or for a home group Bible study – or both! There are questions at the end for group study use.

Visit our website www.micahchallenge.org.nz for a selection of resources and prayers that can be used, including youth and Sunday School materials.

The Debt of Our Prayers

*'Those cultures which are far removed from biblical culture risk reading the Bible as fiction'—
Musimbi Kanyoro.*

The claim of Musimbi Kanyoro is disturbing. Has our distance from the cultural and historical context of the Bible enabled a form of Christianity to emerge that defangs and spiritualises Scripture; a form of faith that house-trains its economic edginess and softens its political subversiveness? Annie Dillard describes what could be our growing biblical illiteracy:

Why do people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does one not believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares: they should lash us to our pews...¹

*Churches have
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avoid our economic
responsibilities*

Imagine going to a church where you're handed a crash helmet, a life jacket, fastened tightly to your seat and cautioned that oxygen masks could drop from the ceiling. It's not what you'd expect of a community of faith, is it? A gentler Tom Beaudoin claims that the domesticated and private look of our faith is simply a cheaper and safer distraction:

Churches have invented many escape hatches to avoid the Scriptures' economic spirituality ... These escape hatches proffer a way to avoid our economic responsibilities, and they go by many names disguised as keys to Christian life: over-focusing on individual sexual morality, issuing woes about the secular culture, or reducing Christian faith to a verbal act of 'confessing Jesus'... When these escape hatches ... are substituted for the gateway of economic spirituality, then we are dealing with a kind of cheap grace, submitting ourselves too uncritically to the moral codes of religious institutions rather than asking anew what right economic relationships require today.²

Think of the Lord's Prayer. The congregational invitation to echo the Lord's

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Prayer typically causes a dutiful bowing of heads, a closing of eyes and a host of moving mouths mumbling in sync. I can't say I give it a lot of intentionality. I simply pray, or should I say, recite. I fail to connect with the impact it had on its earliest listeners. I fail to hear its countering economic definitions of enough and equality. I fail to see how it evokes the scriptural histories of the Exodus and of Sinai. I miss how its alternative politics of forgiveness and reconciliation re-imagine the known political machinery of scarcity and violence. I miss its invitation to practice a newness of trust. Osayande Obery Hendricks says it like this:

... Very Pious, if Jesus' paradigmatic prayer (called the Lord's Prayer) has as its paramount concern bread for subsistence in a time of hunger, relief from debt when an unjust debt structure crushed the people underfoot and the establishment of God's sole sovereignty when the people's misery was largely the by-product of Caesar's authority, then why is the Lord's prayer not also called the Lord's Paradigmatic Critique of Political Economy? The Lord's Model of Social Analysis?³

*The Lord's Prayer...
confronts us first with
the image of family*

A critique of the incumbent economic and political imagination? The evoking of something counter-cultural, the countering of what everyone expected had always been and always has to be? The possibility of something fresh? Is that what the earliest listeners heard in this prayer? If we could recover some of its original energy and translate it into our own contexts, what would we hear this prayer say? What would it sound like today?

Pray with me:

Our Father in heaven ...

The current economic imagination divides, polarises and segregates. The descriptor of 'Our Father' counters this divisiveness with a newer and more globally inclusive image of family. Shane Claiborne comments on what

this could mean for our practice of economics:

As we consider what it means to be 'born again', as the evangelical jargon goes, we must ask what it means to be born again into a family in which our sisters and brothers are starving to death. Then we begin to see why rebirth and redistribution are inextricably bound up in one another ... It also becomes scandalous for the church to spend money on windows and buildings when some family members don't even have water. Welcome to the dysfunctional family of Yahweh.⁴

Similarly, Muse W. Dube Shomanah contends:

By designating God as a parent, the Lord's Prayer confronts us with the image of family. And family for the most part means unity, love, relationships, care and staying together. Christians, nations, races, women and men of different colours, sizes and shapes in different countries and continents—all are 'children' of the same parent. If all those who recite the Lord's Prayer were to grasp this truth, how would they live with a globalisation that strips one member of the family naked so that another might be overdressed.⁵

The image of 'in heaven' evokes the economic poetry of Isaiah 65 and the promise of a new day when lions and lambs will co-exist without enmity. These daring images invert our current economic imagination, which is driven by a form of fearful competitiveness where: '... the big fish eat the little ones, not my problem, give me some ...'⁶, a practice of economics that only dislocates and takes.

... hallowed be Your name ...

The dominance of our current economic imagination can be felt everywhere. Its slogans, jingles, logos and product names saturate the look and noise of our private and

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public spaces. Alissa Quart discovered ‘the average 10-year-old has memorized from 300 to 400 brands. Ninety-two percent of kids request brand-specific products.’⁷ Jim Wallis laments:

The images dance before us every waking moment. They attract, lure and create desire; they awaken the greed and the covetousness of our worst selves ... At every level of the life cycle, our hopes and fears, vanities and securities, aspirations and appetites are carefully researched and mercilessly exploited ... Everything has a sponsor now. Every moment of every day is brought to you by somebody who wants to sell us something—most of which is demonstrably harmful to us or useless for a meaningful and satisfying life. The beginning of consumer wisdom is to understand that we have become part of the merchandise. Consumers are now what is bought and sold.⁸

*‘Your Kingdom’ and
‘Your will’ speak of
different means and
ends...*

The imagery of ‘hallowing’ the name of God counters this incessant economic branding of life and evokes the image of a free God who invites people into a new identity of freedom. The name of God, ‘I Am Who I Am’, cannot be commodified, objectified or packaged for sale like everything else. It is deliberately enigmatic, mysterious, slippery. The *free and freeing* nature of this ‘hallowed name’ enables the (re)claiming and (re)naming of free or liberated spaces which cannot be monopolised or traded, and disputes the idolatrous imposition of our possessive rule on the world.

... Your kingdom come, Your will be done ...

The incumbent economic imagination dictates the ends and means of what is desirable and possible. The corporate kingdoms of Telecom, Coca Cola, Adidas, Ford, Apple, McDonalds, Microsoft, Nike, Speights, Lotto, The Warehouse, Westpac and a host of innumerable others, continually invent deals and spin on how to live (exercises, habits,

products, the means) and on what is our destiny (goals, dreams, lifestyles, purposes, success, wants, the ends). The imagery of ‘Your Kingdom’ and ‘Your will’ speak of the different means and ends of a crucified King who served with a table and a towel. Eugene Peterson explains the deep tension of these images:

More often than not I find my Christian brothers and sisters uncritically embracing the ways and means practiced by the high-profile men and women who lead large corporations, congregations, nations and causes, people who show us how to make money, win wars, manage people, sell products, manipulate emotions, and who then write books or give lectures telling us how we can do what they are doing. But these ways and means more often than not violate the ways of Jesus.

He continues, and I think this is the countering crux of this Kingdom imagery:

Christians today are conspicuous for going along with whatever the culture decides is charismatic, successful (relevant), influential—whatever gets things done, whatever can gather a crowd of followers—hardly noticing that these means and ends are at odds with the clearly marked way that Jesus walked and called us to follow. Doesn’t anybody notice that the ways and means taken up, often enthusiastically, are blasphemously at odds with the way Jesus leads his followers? Why doesn’t anyone notice?⁹

... on earth as it is in heaven.

The insatiability of the incumbent economic imagination depreciates creation. It devalues people and it diminishes the sacredness of place. The ‘glocal’ ditty *I shop therefore I am*, illustrates how we experience and frame our humanity. It is incredibly disempowering and fosters a learned helplessness. Am I only what I consume? Are we only how we dress, what we earn, where we live, what we make

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of the natural materials of earth, what we spend? Is this it? The imagery of ‘on earth as it is in heaven’ counters this devaluing of people and place and re-dignifies the creation with something of a ‘cameo partnership’ in the continuing saga of God; we’re entrusted ‘insiders’ who have a critical contribution to make to the fusion of heaven and earth. Kenneth Bailey says it like this:

The Christian faith is not just a methodology for preparing disembodied souls for the next world ... The unspoken assumption ... is that the (sole?) purpose of the Christian faith is to ‘fit us for heaven’. Ecology, peace among peoples and nations, economic justice, racial equality, and refugees and land rights are all political issues that have to do with *this world* and are thus beyond the scope of the concerns of the Christian faith. But such is not the case if we pray ‘thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth*’. The oft-quoted saying of Jesus ‘My Kingdom is not of this world’ (KJV) is better translated ‘My Kingdom is not *from* this world. If my Kingdom were *from* this world, my followers would be fighting’ (John 18.36 NRSV, italics added). The origins and inner dynamics of the Kingdom of God do not evolve out of the culture and politics of this world. But the Kingdom is *on earth* and thereby is deeply concerned for the earth and all that happens to the people who live on it...¹⁰

To pray for daily bread is a simple but clear reminder ... that it is God's will that there be food for all

... *Give us today our daily bread.*

The sacred mantra of the current economic imagination is *me, myself and mine*. The imagery of ‘giving our daily bread’ counters this individualistic and isolating self-sufficiency with a mutual dependency on otherness, a neediness. Eugene Peterson comments:

Praying for bread acknowledges need. We are creatures who are interdependent in this huge and intricate marvel of creation,

where everything and everyone is related and in touch with everything and everyone else. When we pray for bread we make a decidedly (non-independent) declaration of dependence. We don’t have it within ourselves to be ourselves. We renounce the silly pretentiousness of posing as a self-made person. We humbly take our place in ‘the great chain of being’.

He goes on to describe how this imagery evokes a contrasting and humbler economic practice of mutual gift-giving and gift-receiving, economic practices of reciprocity:

Needs are not limitations that interfere with or reduce or flatten our lives. Needs prepare us for a life of receptivity, a readiness to receive what can only be received as a gift. Needs open the door into this vast giving-receiving ecological intricacy of sky and sea, clover and bee, man and wife, horse and carriage. Needs don’t reduce us to ‘mere’ creatures; they provide the conditions in which we are able to live in reciprocal relation with wildflowers and woodpeckers, with sons and daughters, with parents and grandparents. The limitations inherent in needs prevent us from illusions of grandeur and the isolations of selfish pride. The limitations of our created state are invitations to live in a generous and receptive dynamic in the creaturely life that teems around us. Limits don’t limit us from being fully human. They only limit us from being God.¹¹

The imagery of ‘gifting (and receiving) our daily bread’ (and not cake), curbs the excessive over-consumption and over-production of our incumbent economic imagination. Muse W. Dube Shomanah captures the ‘glocal’ implications of this alternative giving and receiving of need:

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To pray for daily bread is a simple but clear reminder to all Christians that it is God's will that there be food for all but that food is not readily available to all on a daily basis. Praying for daily bread confronts those with refrigerators, storerooms and supermarkets stuffed with food with a question: Why do I not feel the urgency to pray for daily bread while some homeless, some jobless and even some hardworking persons have nothing to put on their plates and that of their children? The Lord's Prayer gives Christian communities and institutions the task of being responsible sons and daughters of God who need to remember those members of the family who do not have any daily bread, but who cannot go on without. It challenges all who eat, store or throw away food to be producers and givers of daily bread ... To pray for daily bread in the age of globalisation should therefore also be a call to repentance. Uttering this line should challenge Christians who have become too comfortable with national and international economic structures which pump excess food to some areas and deprive many millions to realize that their contexts are inconsistent with God's will for the world.¹²

The current global financial downturn, with its new companions of a global food crisis and local food insecurity (evidenced in New Zealand by the 44% increase of people seeking food parcels from the food banks of The Salvation Army and by increases in people obtaining Special Needs Grants for food from Work and Income), only heightens the urgency of embracing this economic imagery of 'our bread'. There is enough for everyone, everywhere. The imagery of 'our daily bread', the giving and receiving of enough for today, is a pledge and promise that

The imagery of 'forgiving debts and debtors' challenges ...and counters with equalizing or levelling practices of forgiveness and reconciliation.

resists the incumbent economic drivers and fearful grasping of scarcity.

... Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

The financial and political machinery of the incumbent economic imagination distributes credit and debt unevenly, unfairly. Philip Jenkins captures how credit and debt is experienced differently in nations of the South:

... in Africa and Asia, coping with debt and credit is a vital everyday issue, for communities and for individuals. Unlike the situation in the (nations of the North), property ownership is not sufficiently widespread to make institutions such as mortgage lending commonplace or reliable. People find whatever security they can offer—including themselves and their bodies—and at whatever interest they can obtain. In some societies, forms of debt slavery still function, while moneylenders and usurers threaten terrible physical sanctions against non-payers.

Sometimes, repayment can be made by providing young relatives as sex workers in neighbouring cities. Such injustices have their parallels at the national level, as many global South nations find hopes of development thwarted by unthinkably vast debts, often incurred by larcenous past dictatorships. Debt of various kinds is, in short, a fundamental part of life and a basic obstacle preventing the advancement of self or society.¹³

Developing countries of the South now pay more in debt servicing to the nations of the North than they get in new credit. The distribution of debt and credit is a means of domination of creditors over debtors, of the haves over the have-nots. The imagery of 'forgiving debts and debtors' challenges this divisive and hierarchical nature of our borrowing and lending, and counters it with



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equalizing or levelling practices of forgiveness and reconciliation. Muse W. Dube Shomanah observes:

To pray the Lord's Prayer for the forgiveness of debts as one has forgiven debtors is thus to call for economic restructuring—a restructuring that frees the oppressed from exploitative systems and calls those in positions of power to abandon their unjust economic strategies ... The exploiters ... are forgiven, not so that they may continue in their practices in good conscience but precisely as a statement against their exploitative systems. To forgive your debtors in this sense is to say, 'I know what you're doing to me and how you're doing it. It is unjust, I am angry and I want this to end and for all of us to seek a better way to relate'.¹⁴

A better way to relate? See how this imagery continues to demand a newer practice of economics? It's not simply the forgiveness of moral debts that God has on the table, is it? Stop and think (pray)

this through: *if we were to enact something of this prayer in our context, what could it look like?* If Christian communities were to enact something of what Shomanah called the forgiveness of 'economic restructuring', what could it look like globally? Locally? Personally? Can we offer the indebted clients of our budgeting services more than simply smarter financial literacy? Is it possible for communities of faith to engage in the provision of interest-free loans? Is that even doable or practical? What if people

...it is not Pharaoh, nor Caesar, nor the financial politicking of the IMF, the World Bank, or the G8 who have the last say...

deliberately defaulted on loans? Is it time to rediscover the Sabbath economics of debt release envisioned at Sinai? I hear in this imagery of 'forgiving debts and debtors' echoes of William Booth and 'The Poor Man's Bank' of 'Darkest England and the Way Out', a project of redistribution and reciprocal relief that promised to curb the demoralising and predatory violence of uneven debt and unfair dependency. Is that something The Salvation Army could reinvent for today?

... And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever.

The anxious insecurity that drives our current economic imagination is deceptive and entangling. The concluding imagery of this prayer counters our manufactured nervousness. The images whisper defiantly that it is not Pharaoh, nor Caesar, nor the financial politicking of the IMF, the World Bank, or the G8 who have the last say. The sword surrenders to the towel. The last word belongs to

God.

... Amen.

Malcolm Irwin

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Discussion Questions

For a group study, use the article like a 'Book Group'. Print out copies for everyone to have read before they come to the group. Use the following questions as starters only. Don't try to use all of them, but pick out those that spark ideas and discussion for the group.

1. The political subversiveness of Christianity.

- What do you think of Musimbi Kanyoro's claim that our cultural distance from Biblical times makes us less likely to take the Bible seriously?
- Have we over-spiritualised the Bible in ways that blunts its political impact? Has the church in New Zealand lost the edge of political subversiveness of the early church? What are the escape hatches that we have installed for ourselves?

2. "Our Father"

- To what extent do we see Christian believers in Kenya, Costa Rica, Pakistan or Palestine as 'children of the same parent' as ourselves?
- Does the changing concept of family in the New Zealand lessen our sense of responsibility to the extended family?

3. "Hallowed be your name"

- The author calls 'hallowing' the name of God a counter to the 'incessant economic branding of life', resulting in a 'new identity of freedom'. What might that mean for you?

4. "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done..."

- The prayer calls for the Kingdom of God here, now. Not limited to a heavenly future, but the will of God being done here on earth. The quote from Kenneth Bailey says that "the Kingdom is *on earth* and thereby is deeply concerned for the earth and all that happens to the people who live on it...". Does that make a difference to how we live in our suburban homes? Does it make a difference to our concern for ecological/environmental issues? Climate change issues?
- The quotes from Eugene Peterson contrast the cultural standards of corporate success with the ways of Jesus. In what ways do you think that these corporate standards are in opposition to the ways of Jesus? Is it possible for the church in New Zealand in 2009 to define leadership on the model of the one who 'served with a table and a towel'? How might this look?
- The prayer "has as its paramount concern... the establishment of God's sole sovereignty when the people's misery was largely the by-product of Caesar's authority". In what ways might the prayer "Your Kingdom come" become a challenge to the political structures of New Zealand?

5. "Give us our daily bread..."

- "To pray for daily bread in the age of globalisation should therefore also be a call to repentance." Why?
- How much do we allow ourselves to be defined by what we own or consume?

6. "Forgive us our debts..."

- Most translations change 'debts' to 'trespasses' or 'sins'. This spiritualises and personalises the prayer. Economic debt has become the major global crisis of the start of this century. What was the impact for you of bringing this prayer into the issue of economic justice and debt repayment?

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7. "I miss how its alternative politics of forgiveness and reconciliation re-imagine the known political machinery of scarcity and violence. I miss its invitation to practice a newness of trust."
- Spend some time in silence to re-imagine for yourself the impact of this prayer.
 - Pray the prayer together, pausing over each phrase.

Micah Challenge is a global campaign to mobilise Christians against poverty. The campaign aims to deepen Christian engagement with impoverished and marginalised communities, and to influence leaders of rich and poor nations to fulfil their promise to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

These two aims - one looking inward and calling on Christians, and the other looking outward and calling on leaders - are interlocked. For many Christians, churches, and Christian organisations, engagement in political advocacy with poor communities will be a new step built upon a new understanding of Christ's mission for the church. Micah Challenge is encouraging these Christians to explore and embrace 'integral mission'. While for many Christians who are already engaged in work with poor communities, Micah Challenge offers a global framework for speaking up with the poor, particularly for achievement of the MDGs.

Micah Challenge sees the acceptance in the United Nations of the MDGs as creating a moment of unique potential. A moment when the intention of all of the world's leaders to halve poverty by 2015, echoes something of the mind of the Biblical prophets and the teachings of Jesus concerning the poor. A moment when the world has the means to dramatically reduce poverty and hunger!

www.micahchallenge.org.nz

¹ Annie Dillard, cited in Eugene Peterson, 1989, *The Contemplative Pastor*.

² Tom Beaudoin, 2003, *Consuming Faith*.

³ Osaynde Obery Hendricks, 1995, *Guerrilla Exegesis: A Post-Modern Proposal for Insurgent African-American Biblical Interpretation*, Koinonia, Vol. 7, no. 1.

⁴ Shane Claiborne, 2006, *The Irresistible Revolution*.

⁵ Musa W. Dube Shomanah, 1997, *Praying the Lord's Prayer in a Global Economic Era, African Perspectives*.

⁶ Radiohead, 2000 *Optimistic*.

⁷ Cited in Tom Beaudoin, 2003, *Consuming Faith*.

⁸ Jim Wallis, 1994, *The Soul of Politics*.

⁹ Eugene Peterson, 2007, *The Jesus Way*.

¹⁰ Kenneth Bailey, 2008, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, italics in original.

¹¹ Eugene Peterson, 2008, *The Word Made Flesh*.

¹² Musa W. Dube Shomanah, *ibid*.

¹³ Philip Jenkins, 2006, *The New Faces of Christianity*.

¹⁴ Musa W. Dube Shomanah, *ibid*.