

ADDRESS by Barbara Clifford, Glasgow Unitarian Church, on 17 June 2012

Living in a material world during a recession

I have given some thought to my title for today's sermon because of the effects of the changes in today's economy are making to us all. Whatever our personal situations: employed, unemployed, students, retired and living on a pension, or single parents dependant on benefits, or, even asylum seekers having to beg for money because they can't legally work, we are all caught up in our country's recession.

Most religions caution against putting too much energy into collecting things at the expense of connecting to people. My beliefs are Christian and the words and example of Jesus have been important to me since I was a child in the Welsh valleys and attended Baptist Sunday School. In those days poverty was a daily experience for me, my friends, my neighbours. Life was hard and the Bible stories about caring for each other were important. Not that we needed these stories – the harshness of poverty meant that we wouldn't have survived without this community of caring and sharing.

In our first reading we hear Jesus say that the rich have special problems. They are too tied to their many things to put people first. The poor don't have things to be tied to, so they have a headstart in the race to heaven, so to speak. But poverty itself is not good. It means that the choices you have are limited; it robs people of self respect; it means early death; it means that a cycle of being exploited is harder to break and the dream of many poor people was not that they would escape but that their children would.

Norman MacCaig's poem, shows how an explanation in a painting is reproduced in real life – “the ruined temple outside” is a beggar who had been passed by, by the tourists who were listening to the priest's explanation. What a beautiful contrast between those who exhibit rational understanding about poverty with those with a compassionate heart that connects people.

Our world is much more complex than Palestine 2100 years ago. It is even much more complex than the world of 1967 when *Assisi* was published, just 45 years ago. If the lessons they teach are helpful, these cannot depend on the simplicity of material society of their day but rather on our common human condition. Have basic human needs for connection and community, for warmth, food, sleep, etc changed in 2000 years? Perhaps the recession that really matters is our loss of connection rather than our loss of living standard.

Britain's NHS was set up by Aneurin Bevan in 1948, because of the widespread medical and poverty issues in pre-war Britain. It promised to cover people from the “cradle to the grave”. The brain-child of this famous Welshman from the coal-mining valleys has been one of our country's most

valuable resources. But, while the majority of patients have a good experience of the Health Service, some are less fortunate in their care due to lack of resources, trained staff, even beds. We hear news reports of people spending many hours lying in cold corridors awaiting beds, of poor food and of lack of hygiene and facilities in our hospitals.

The problems of our NHS are made worse by several factors:

Our society is ageing – we are living longer and age comes with health issues. Some elderly people are frail and fall more frequently needing hospital treatment for broken or fractured limbs. One of the big issues facing this generation is dementia, which requires older people to have care, to remain in their own homes, and although this is funded mainly by the Government there is also a need for older people to contribute to their charges. In some cases there is a reluctance or inability of patients to pay for their care, which leads to more vulnerability and more accidents within their homes. Nursing home care and residential care are not always satisfactory due to lack of trained staff and unsuitable carers. Services and facilities for the elderly are now under threat due to the recession and financial issues, with the government looking to reducing or even scrapping free bus fares and winter fuel payments and complicating the tax system as it attempts to claw back benefits given to the wealthy.

Excessive drinking is a strain on our hospital services. We've all seen pictures on the telly of alcohol-fuelled disturbances in most city centres. Even many illnesses have alcohol as a factor. The NHS information centre revealed a 60% rise in drugs prescribed for alcohol disorders in the last eight years. Alcohol costs the NHS more than £3 billion a year and the problem is taking a terrible toll on society. And although there are substantial amounts of money being ploughed into this sector, there is still need for more. The government makes a lot of money from alcohol taxes which puts policies for health and income in conflict.

The same can be argued for cigarettes and smoking, a big earner for government monies through taxes. We've realised for decades that smoking causes cancer. Recent laws ban people from smoking in public places; require that cigarette packages print a warning; and taxes have increased faster than inflation, but there is still a core population addicted to nicotine that the NHS has to be responsible for and the costs of treatment greatly exceed tobacco taxes.

The successes of modern medicine create problems, too. Drug companies have ploughed money into research and the last 10 years have seen fantastic advances in treatments for illnesses that were previously death sentences. But this sometimes comes at a cost that not only the individual but the NHS cannot afford to pay. So in spite of ever increasing NHS budgets, the race to make treatments free at the point of service is being lost. If we lose this important principle that Aneurin Bevan established, the effects on the low-paid will be horrific.

The recession is attacking our materialistic life style from other directions, too.

The welfare system set up to provide pensions and insurance against unemployment is facing meltdown. No work, no wages to deduct contributions to help run our state welfare. The unemployed need welfare state benefits to be able to live on, to help pay their rent or mortgage, buy food, etc. yet the life style that people aspire to has only been possible by excessive borrowing and the welfare system, another defence against the effects of poverty, is crashing under its own weight. Building housing cost into welfare has led to anomalies and correcting these will be painful.

The news on the Queen's Diamond Jubilee reported the exploitation of unemployed people who, after travelling some hundreds of miles to help out at the celebrations on the River Thames, were left to sleep under bridges without even adequate raincoats and paid a sum of £2.60 per hour to augment their unemployment benefit.

I am a member of the Public Partnership Forum in East Kilbride, which addresses issues regarding health, pensions, etc and this week I attended a discussion on the government's plans for cutting down pensions; people will be working longer than age 60/65 to be enabled to receive the state pension as we live longer. Yes, I am afraid there is more campaigning and advocating for the public if we want to escape poverty in our old age. Sheer economics means that we have to contribute more just because we will be living longer, but does the extra contribution come all come from the worker or from the employer or from the government or some mixture. If the government puts money into pensions does this take money away from the health system?

As individuals we can't do anything about the turmoil in the banks but we can look at our dependence on things at the expense of community. And we have to do this ourselves and with others in ways that make sense. It may not make sense to go and sell all our possessions and give everything to the poor, but it does make sense to ask if we really need a particular thing. We are bombarded with advertising that encourages us to buy things. Do we really need a new washing machine or car or golf club if the old one is working? What happens to the old one? Recycling has become official policy and this is one area where individual and community can work together, but only if the recycling in your Council area provides for a range of collections. And we forget the mantra of recycling, which is Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. It's not just about recycling but about reducing our consumption and reusing our things.

Returning to the Diamond Jubilee celebrations we have seen the slogan 'Keep Calm and Carry On', I should imagine a very good reminder of the World War when so many people's lives were endangered, so many loved ones lost: Sons, husbands, and fathers, not to forget the civilian deaths involving wives, mothers, and daughters. The bread winner of the family taken out of the equation of

children. People were left to carry on with a pittance of an income, through pensions or the woman having to find jobs to support their families. In those days people had limited ability to buy so they repaired and mended clothes and household items but now when things go wrong new items are purchased. Today there's no such thing as buying an element for a kettle or the electric cooker and even replacing a battery on some mobile phones or laptops needs special equipment – manufacturing of items does not allow for repair. In our materialistic world we are encouraged go to the shops and purchase new.

At one time our Unitarian churches and other religious organisations were important in supporting people both with practical and moral support. Now, however, with attendances declining and indeed many churches closing, there is not so much influence. When one remembers the good that local churches have done in protecting and advocating and caring for vulnerable people we can see the need to find ways of building our congregations again to help safeguard our communities and our human rights.

Building our congregations, however, will need us to be more than closed talking shops. We claim we are open rather than closed, but unless people walk through the open door we might as well be closed. Getting together for worship once a week is not enough to build the community that will help us through the necessary changes being forced on us by the recession. Nor will it do anything to counteract the public image of religion as out of touch with real world problems. It is hard for city centre churches that do not have a natural surrounding congregation, but being hard is not an excuse for not trying. Socials to foster community, Education such as courses on Unitarianism,, Encounter groups to encourage personal growth, Outreach to the public, Worship and a paid Leader who will be a public Unitarian face to spread our concerns and values, supporting groups that help the Homeless and Asylum Seekers and such. Unfortunately, I don't think squeezing everything into Sunday mornings for 90 minutes is the answer.

Amen