

Social Justice in 2010

Address to the Social Justice in the City Forum

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I am speaking about justice and injustice on Aboriginal land. I respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land, the Wurundjeri People. I acknowledge that we are talking about social justice in the midst of a very strong story of marginalisation and dispossession.

In 1994 I started working in community development in some of the large public housing estates around Sydney. There I learnt a valuable lesson: *that everyone has a story.*

This might sound obvious. It is however the most obvious truths that sometimes need to be spoken.

Now is one of those times. On the one hand we have a Government committed to the humiliating blanket imposition of compulsory income management on the basis of race and then of class. On the other hand we have a Leader of the Opposition who persists with the most offensive attitudes to our sisters and brothers who are doing it tough.

Everyone has a story.

Our stories are still happening and they don't happen in limbo. They happen in the context of developing social and economic structures. Each person's story is a unique intersection of the personal and the political. Each intersection is continuing to change.

I also learnt to say "we", "our", and "us" instead of "they", "theirs" and "them".

The Opposition Leader's recent comments on poverty and homelessness simply being poor personal choices betray a real inability to understand how our intersections between the personal and the political work.

The deeply offensive aspect of his comments is that he continues to blame people for being left out or pushed out. Nothing could be further from the truth. Choices are massively constrained for those who have been systematically locked out of the nation's prosperity. There's not much choice between a rock and a hard place. But, of course, such a world-view lets governments off the hook. It denies the reality of the social. It re-writes history.

When I was forced to really engage with what was happening in people's lives I was able to see the bigger picture emerging. I found myself being completely re-educated on the causes of inequality and how these social relations intersected in the lives of the people who were pushed to the edges of society.

The members of the St Vincent de Paul Society and many NGOs across Australia every day see and touch the Australian face of marginalisation. For many of us we see this experience as a sacramental encounter with Christ. Many of us dare to believe in the Real Presence of Christ in our sisters and brothers who are disadvantaged and demonised. We are driven by the truth of what we see and touch. And the truth is that we, as a society, have within our means the ability to change the structures that cause or exacerbate poverty and exclusion. We have the means. The question is whether we, as a nation, have the political will.

We continue in Australia to be subjected to social policies that sit well with the kind of paternalism exemplified in Margaret Thatcher's oft-cited contention that "there is no such thing as society." Paternalism starts (and ends!) with a highly unequal relationship of power. It is summed up well by Lawrence Mead, one of its leading US proponents, as "the close supervision of the poor." The *New Paternalism* is a relatively recent version of this approach. The focus is on the supposed individual deficit rather than on the structural deficits. The very name bespeaks the manner in which people are being objectified and treated like young children who supposedly have no capacity to make decisions or take control. Any decision imputed to "them" is roundly condemned by a moralizing discourse from on high.

The New Paternalism is exemplified by such policies as compulsory income management or using the threat of financial penalties on Sole Parents or people in receipt of Unemployment Benefits, as if this could improve a person's chances of employment or their ability to ensure that their children get to school.

The New Paternalism is built on the following assumptions: *People are largely to blame for their own marginalisation; people who are marginalised are naturally without power; power naturally rests with those who deserve it; those with power can, at best, use their power to bring about a change in the behaviour of those without power; those with power can, at worst, ignore the problems of the people who are marginalised; the problems experienced by people who are marginalised are their own problems; but their problems bleed into the "mainstream" through increased costs, increased crime, loss of productivity, market constraints, and disorder.*

These assumptions are as pernicious as they are unproven.

They lead to either treating people as if they are "sick" (pathologization) or as if they are morally bad (criminalization). Being locked up often follows hot on the heels of being locked out.

Nothing good can come out of these approaches. They are cursed not only by their lack of compassion but also by their denial of justice. As the Prophet Isaiah (10:1-3) said:

"Woe betide those who enact unjust laws and draft oppressive legislation, depriving the poor of justice, robbing the weakest of my people of their rights, plundering the widow and despoiling the fatherless!"

We should be listening to the people who are most oppressed by the structures that cause inequality and marginalisation.

We are obliged to engage in bringing about the necessary social change.

The only lasting liberation, of course, is won collectively by the people who hunger for it, to paraphrase the Beatitude.

Jean-Paul Sartre once noted that no matter how terrible the situation a person finds themselves in the impetus to seek change does not come automatically. He explained that

someone does not wake up one morning and decide that this is enough, that something must be done. No, argued Sartre, you will do something about the situation only when you realise that an alternative is possible. This is something that is particularly evident in the lives of the courageous women who flee domestic violence. This must happen on a collective level if we are serious about creating genuine pathways out of homelessness and poverty. We must create the alternatives rather than condemning our own to be imprisoned in an oppressive *status quo*. More than this, we must have the courage to imagine the possible together if we are to build the kind of society where homelessness and exclusion are prevented in the first place.

When Tony Thornton, our National Secretary, first read a version of this speech that appeared as an article in *Eureka Street*, he came into my office and put it to me that Sartre's analysis doesn't quite tell the whole story. He said to me that he'd really thought about it and that in his experience people often feel that things are so bad that they decide that enough is enough and they take the leap into the unknown, without any kind of clear vision of an apparent alternative.

I am grateful that he offered me this critique. I think that he's absolutely right.

This was further borne out by some of the comments that were posted online in response to my article. Many of these comments consisted of the sharing of incredible stories of sadness and hope. As one person wrote:

"I applaud the courage of a number of respondents on this page who by telling their stories have pointed out that denial of personal dignity is as equally pernicious as poverty."

The bad news alone is not enough to challenge the badness. The good news is that things need not stay this way. This is the only route out of the social misery that has been created by unjust structures: the realization that another world is possible, another society is possible, another life is possible.

But the truth is that it is not always apparent that another world is possible. The realization does not always come with the dawn.

In such conditions our task is a huge one. Our historical task, our historical mission, is to create the alternative when it does not exist!

For those of us who stand shoulder to shoulder with our sisters and brothers who are doing it tough, this is what we believe: that we're each of us carrying at least a few grains of sand and some gravel to the building site of a better society; one in which people are not locked out.

As Brecht put it: *"Because things are the way they are, things will not stay the way they are."*

Believe it!

This is the heart of why, against the individualistic grain, we dare to celebrate the social.

I want to leave you with two propositions.

The first comes from Professor John McKnight. It goes like this:

“Revolutions begin when people who are defined as problems achieve the power to redefine the problem.”

I believe that the mission of the St Vincent de Paul Society is very much along these lines.

Our work is not that of passing judgment over the deserving or undeserving poor.

Neither is our work that of coercing people into the mainstream because this is good for them and they need to be told, of course, what is really good for them.

Social justice cannot come from above.

Which leads me to the second, more dangerous proposition.

This one has been anonymously scrawled on the walls of the slums and other zones of hope in some of the world’s most unequal societies. It goes like this:

“Where the conditions for revolution do not exist it is the job of the revolutionary to create them.”

This may sound like a call to arms. I see it more as a vocation to love.

Frederic Ozanam once wrote:

“All my life I have followed the poetry of love in preference to the poetry of anger.”

I believe that that the poetry of love that Frederic embraced, that Frederic spoke, that Frederic followed, is simply the poetry of compassion, the social poetry of social justice. Why a *social* poetry? Why a *social* justice? Because we are called to immerse our lives in the heart of the social. This is where the poor and marginalised are made. This is where the poor and marginalised are struggling for a new society. This is where, in the words of St Vincent de Paul:

“we seek, and find, our God.”