

## There's a rat in mi kitchen...

Scriptures: [Jeremiah 28:1-9](#); [Luke 3:1-14](#)

There's a rat in my kitchen.

No, not mine, personally. My cat sees to that. More like, there's a rat in **our** kitchen.

The reference is to the UB40 song from 1986. When questioned, everybody involved officially said it was about the state of council housing in England – but it was an open secret that the “rat” was the Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. This was the era building up to the Poll Tax riots, as people were increasingly agitating against Thatcher's version of the Participation Society (if you have the money, you can participate, otherwise you can sod off...), and the song became the anthem of the anti-Thatcherite struggle.

It's particularly apt as an entry here today, in light of our own late-blooming Participation Society – nothing but regurgitated Thatcherism/Reaganism – and the latest budget and accompanying social legislation here.

Oh, we could have found other rats to talk about: the rat in the European kitchen, exemplified by the drowning of hundreds of would-be immigrants in the Mediterranean – the result of a failure to accept the lesson of history, taught for centuries, that the Mediterranean is not so much a barrier as a high-way, and the refusal to consider a more equitable division of wealth in the world – or the riots in France about the expulsion of teenage asylum seekers, seized from a school bus. Or we could have referred to the rat of justice here, where the level of people falsely imprisoned has reached new levels for the Dutch, as have payouts of damages to those falsely held (we are now the European leaders in that, at least!), the result of a series of governments whose only approach to social problems is more laws, more police powers, more convictions, more punishment. But for me, the rat in our kitchen is best exemplified by the discussion late last summer about revising the rules on businesses – in this case, health care businesses – so that they can operate more profitably. The proposal was to scrap the rule which says that a patient in a hospital or nursing home must be cleaned up at least once in 24 hours. Why, such a rule is unnecessary – of course, despite the fact that the rule was instituted only about five years ago precisely because such neglect was happening, and despite increasing work-loads and staff reductions to produce “savings”, these institutions would never consider allowing an incontinent, bed-ridden patient to go without being cleaned up! Unnecessary regulation! The market will produce the same effect. If a commercial institution would not provide top-class care, the consumers (they used to be called patients: they are now health care consumers) would take their business elsewhere! Yes, the bedridden patients would just get up and go down the street to another nursing home! Well, all right, their relatives would move them! Oh, they are there because they don't have any relatives? Well, the consumer is king: repeat that often enough and it will be true!

That particular proposal is exemplary, it seems to me, precisely because it reveals what is actually going on. What we've got here is a false belief system; facts be damned: we are dealing with religious belief.

Fifteen years ago, shortly after the beginning of the current economic crisis, Harvey Cox, the Harvard theologian, worked it out in an article called “The Market as God”. (<http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/99mar/marketgod.htm>) He noted that according to economists, the Market, otherwise known as “the Invisible Hand” (even at that we are immediately into ‘god-language’!), has all the qualities of a monotheistic god: it is Omnipresent, Omniscient and Omnipotent; it is active everywhere, takes all things into account, and controls the outcome of all processes – and what is more, controls them for the best, unless thwarted by evils like nationalism, statism or ethics. It has its own anthropology: men are rational, individual actors, capable of identifying and acting in their own best interests. It has its own eschatology and soteriology, a vision of paradise that is like the European Union, only bigger and better, one big free trade union in which the sum total of everybody's selfish interests will produce universal benefit for ever. It has its canon of sacred texts, from Adam Smith through Milton Friedman to Ayn Rand, its own priests and theologians, and its own rituals. It even has its own dogmas that

defy human experience: for instance, if you can believe that advertising functions only to provide the information necessary for rational actors to make informed choices about consuming, well, I have a well-used Virgin Birth to sell you, with two foreskins of Jesus thrown in for free, for those who place an order now! Just dial the number you see on your screen... And none of this is capable of proof; it must be accepted on faith that looks beyond any market collapse. Cox was not being facetious, any more than the Psalmist was being facetious when he wrote that “the man greedy for gain curses and renounces the Lord” (Ps. 10:3-4).

To put it bluntly, in theological language, we are dealing with idolatry. This particular rat is a violation of the first commandment.

The rats in our kitchen are a series of festering social problems, inherent in the way the world is organized, or perhaps, as the Psalmist saw, inherent in the human soul, which should be abhorrent to all we believe as Christians – and, I would add, to Muslims and Jewish believers as well. As UB40 asks, “What we gonna do?”

The first thing is that we must be unequivocal in our condemnation of the rats. We are the heirs to the legacy of the Law and the prophets. The Law condemns the rats, in some cases, such as the counterfeit of free-market capitalism in its aspirations to divine status, on theological grounds; in all cases, in the second table of the law, on practical grounds. And the prophets, heirs to the Law, are the plumb line dropped into the world, to show mankind how askew things have become. Like Amos thundering “Let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24), and Micah teaching “God has told you what is good; and what is it that the Lord asks of you? Only to act justly, love loyalty, and walk wisely before your God.” (Micah 6:8). Like Jeremiah confronting the false prophets of sweetness and light, to say that something is going on here, and you don’t know what it is, do you Mr. Hananiah?

There are hundreds of “shalls” and “shall nots” in the scripture – many, yes, dealing with ritual and ritual purity, and many – the ones we most often hear cited – with human sexuality: but there are certainly at least as many that deal with economic issues and business ethics – weights and measures, the conditions for loans, real estate, leaving gleanings in the fields and vineyards for the welfare of the poor: we’ve talked about them before, and don’t need to repeat them here. But what it does reveal is that the God of the Old Testament was at least as concerned with what happens in the boardroom as with what happens in the bedroom, so to speak.

We sometimes get a skewed impression of this, by the fact that often in the Old Testament “fornication” (i.e., adultery) is used as a metaphor for idolatry. That is most obvious in that long, frankly obscene passage in Ezekiel 16, but it is what stands behind Hosea’s marriage with Gomer. The idea is that God’s people are wedded to Him, and if they follow another god, whether it is a Baal or free-market capitalism, they are “fornicating”. Not every sexual sin denounced in the Old Testament is actually a sexual sin. Seen in context, even the passage in Amos, about fathers and sons lying with the same servant girl, which I have lately seen used to denounce paedophilia, has more to do with the master-servant power relation than with the sexual act (Amos 2:7).

And we need to be clear: Jesus was an heir to this tradition too. The gospel of God’s grace, the Good News of forgiveness, is meaningless unless there is a clear reason for forgiveness and grace: namely, human wrongdoing. The New Testament tells us that the first proclamation of the Gospel, by John the Baptist, in the passage we read this morning, began with a call for repentance, and specifically with a denunciation of power and economic inequalities – the man who has two shirts must share with the man who has none, no profiteering, no extortion. (Luke 3:10-14) But what is more important, Matthew, in his parallel passage, tells us that Jesus, after his baptism by John, began his preaching with the same message (Matt. 4:17). A recognition of sin, of wrongdoing, and specifically of social wrong, is the precondition for the message of grace. Yes: Jesus explicitly confronts the woman at the well at Sychar with her bedroom escapades (John 4) – but equally, he implicitly confronts Zachaeus with his boardroom escapades (Luke 19), and the rich young ruler who asked about the secret of eternal life with his love of wealth (Luke 18:18-27).

Now, we here encounter an issue that is rather a touchy point. Two weeks ago Rev. Couvée spoke

about how we must abandon the idea of God as a surveillance camera, the all-seeing eye that records our every misstep, in favour of a God of mercy and grace. People – particularly modern people, are uncomfortable with that sort of punishing God, and, well, you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. But the problem is that without the noting of wrong, there is no reason for the honey of mercy and grace. It is somewhat like the counterfeit of “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild”, the attempt to draw a distinction between a righteous God and a meek, non-confrontational Jesus: not only does it falsify the Gospel description of Jesus’ conduct, which could be confrontational indeed, but it ignores his own words about his message being a sword that would divide people, even families. And consider this for a moment: it is quite understandable if a perpetrator is uncomfortable with such a picture of God, and it is even quite understandable if a person who believes that they are righteous and invulnerable is uncomfortable – but for victims, this message about a righteous God is a comfort. The concept of God as a surveillance camera who sees all wrong, indeed as a surveillance camera with audio, like the ones in our trams here – for we are told that God hears the blood of Abel crying out, and hears the cry of the oppressed Hebrew slaves in Egypt – is indeed a comfort, even if the response of divine justice does not come as quickly, or in the form, that we might like. And there is the further point to consider: our roles are ever-changing: one day we may be the perpetrator, the next a victim; indeed, we are usually simultaneously both victims and perpetrators, in relative to those with more or less power than ourselves, enjoying some benefits of being in the developing world, or being male, while reaping the benefits of the poverty or oppression of others. For instance, the Western woman, in her jogging suit, who may justly regard herself as a victim of sexism, is at the same time the beneficiary of the sufferings of her sisters in the garment factories of Bangladesh. With respect to a God who sees everything, and is a guarantee of justice, we need to wear it, even if the shoe pinches sometimes; there are other times it will feel very good.

But of course, that condemnation of the wrong – even, or precisely, of our own role in it – is followed by the sweetness of the taste of the water of life, by the word that today Christ has come to share the table with us in our own home.

What else can the church do to fix them rats?

Well, it cannot and should not attempt to make policy recommendations itself. We are not experts in economics, or political science; we are experts in social and personal ethics. We may call for economic justice, for a far-sighted immigration and asylum policy, for justice in the courts, for a foreign policy which is based on justice and dialogue rather than violence, and we have the right to critique proposals on those grounds, but the shaping of those policies should be left to the experts. The failures of our so-called Christian political parties across Europe should be a lesson for us on that.

But can and should we act locally to relieve the pain of victims of “rat bite”? Yes – although we must immediately acknowledge that even with the concerted effort of all churches, the effect will be no more than local, and possibly, given the strength (or weakness) of our churches relative to the complexity and size of our society, possibly not even that. We are not called to build the city of God, any more than we are called to draft legislation. God will do the former, and the politicians will do the latter. But what we can do in and with the church is provide a foretaste of that city of God, that society in which persons are valued for who they are, not for their wealth or race or status or capacities as producers or consumers, a micro-society which rises above the things on which discrimination and prejudice is based, a welcoming community that does care and share, a fellowship that embodies the core of the gospel, that God has first loved us, came into our world to seek us out when we could or would not find Him, and then loves others just as God loved us. The purpose is not to ameliorate the suffering, but to witness to the grace of God, to show the world, as best we can, that there is some other way than living in a rat-infested kitchen.

That’s what we gonna do...

(UB 40, There’s a rat in mi kitchen: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bS0fXQN6zrl> )