



JOHN·RAY·INITIATIVE

Connecting Environment, Science and Christianity

News and Ideas: Lifestyle edition

No 21, June 2009

Pentecost and Lifestyle

Editorial *David Thistlethwaite*

In JRI, we have always emphasised personal application of the environmental implications of the Gospel. In this edition of the newsletter, we look particularly at how we may move from science and personal conviction to action.

The recent expenses scandal has brought to the fore the question of what it means to obey the law. Is it a question of 'what I can get away with' in terms of strict legality? Or is there an expectation that we should follow the spirit of the law, and not just the letter? This distinction takes us right back to Pentecost, which we have just celebrated.

In a free society, we rely on large numbers of people keeping the law essentially because they agree with it. There would never be enough police, or surveillance cameras, to check all our actions all of the time – though sometimes it begins to feel that there could be! But our aim is that from childhood, the law is 'internalised'. Trust flourishes where 'law' is clearly 'written in our hearts'. That is why it is so devastating when trust placed in leaders is abused.

The environmental crisis has introduced a lot of new law. Waste and recycling are examples of laws which depend on millions of people executing them in the right spirit. We cannot control whether or not people put a plastic cup in a paper recycling bin. There is a presumption that we have a culture of willingness. In practice there is a lot of mixture and no punishment for carelessness. A true environmental conscience develops slowly.

As Christians, we may be more aware than many (though perhaps less aware than many Greens) of the things we 'ought', to do, not just in terms of waste, but also measuring our energy footprint against a carbon-neutral ideal, and our consumption in terms of fair trade. At this point, we have a choice. We can think in terms of 'law', or in terms of 'spirit'. If we think in terms of law, then the whole thing will be burdensome, an impossible ideal leading to excuses and evasions.

However, if we get to the spirit of the law, there is the possibility of a lifestyle that is heartfelt and creative, working with the possibilities not of yesterday, when oil was flowing, travel was cheap and we took no thought for the future, but of today.

How do we get to the spirit of the law? How do we experience our own environmental Pentecost, so that the 'law of God is written in our hearts'? The disciples at Pentecost had an advantage over some of us. They had the commission of Jesus, just as we have. They had the new covenant of Jesus, replacing that of Sinai, just as we have. But they absolutely knew, because of what they had been through at the Crucifixion, that they did not have the power. That is why they were waiting for the gift of God at

Pentecost. They could not fulfil Christ's commands without his power.

It may seem banal to turn from Pentecost to the comparatively modest demand to follow Jesus by adapting our lifestyle. But the spirit in which we do things is important. Do we model to others an essentially legal and moralistic challenge, placing burdens on them we are unable to carry ourselves? Or do we, in our hearts, love the creation as God loves it, so that we have become sensitised to how we treat it? Do people see a lifestyle based on love?

For those of us who live in the countryside, it is evident that care for creation involves a lot of resources and a lot of hard work. But in the Bible, care for the land also involves rest, quite deliberate rest, letting things be (e.g. Leviticus 26: 35). One of the chief ways in which we can love the creation is to refrain from driving it hard, refrain from work, and to take time to enjoy what God has made. It could be that at such times our Pentecost will happen.

Breathe conference



In JRI we focus on consumerism's environmental consequences. In a complementary emphasis, 'Breathe' is a movement focused on the spiritual condition of consumerism, dedicated to setting people free. Here, at Breathe's April conference in London, 150 people are seen taking the 'Promise of Life'

Promise of life

Because life is a gift, we live
it thankfully
Savour what we have
Pray for what we need.
No longer hurried, distracted, or
worried,
We'll walk through each moment
with God.

Because everything is a gift, we
live with open hands,
Tread lightly on the earth
Share freely our homes and our
things.

No longer restlessly chasing
identity,
We'll be known by our love not
our logos.

Because giving is a gift we live
generously,
Give ourselves deeply to family
and community,
Give joyfully to those in need.
No longer caught in the
consumer dream
We'll invest our all in the
kingdom of love.

Promises to keep?

*The Bible has a lot to say not just about what we should do, but about how we might hope to do it. We thought it would be helpful to ask **Rev Mark Powley**, Breathe's founder, about the network, and how the **Promise of Life** was working out for him. If you wish to adopt it for yourself, see www.breathenetwork.org*

1. What did you learn personally from the Breathe conference? Is it making any difference to you and your lifestyle this week?

For three years we effectively ran Breathe online or by post, but these last two years we've met up for a conference. Meeting up in the flesh makes a huge difference. To be honest, I'm still living off the high of knowing that over 150 people are standing with me in making the Promise of Life. Now I know I'm not the only one who cares about this, and I find that massively encouraging and inspiring.

2. You've just made a new commitment. It seems spirit-based rather than rule-based, giving general guidelines for living rather than specifics. How's it going with you? Is the idea working?

We wouldn't have launched the idea at the April conference if we hadn't first road-tested it with a few friends. Over recent months we've all found the idea of a shared covenant helpful, as long as it's filled with grace.

Some of the people who are trying the Promise use it daily or weekly as a reflection. I have it on my wall to remind me, when I pray, of the lifestyle Jesus calls me to. Now friends in my office know about it, they remind me 'Mark, are you hurried, distracted or worried?' Sometimes that's a bit of a pain, but it's all part of the message getting out there!

In practical terms, I think I have known a deeper thankfulness since publicly taking the promise. I have been challenged to consider how much of my mental energy is taken over by worry. The Breathe website (www.breathenetwork.org) has also helped me to find out more about greener options for daily living.

3. People sometimes worry that their 'little bit', of recycling, or carbon-saving, is going to make too little difference to matter. But the thinking of Breathe seems to be that lifestyle change is good in itself, whether it produces a 'result' or not. Is this correct?

I think that's right. I wouldn't want to belittle the difference that even small changes can make, but it has to be about more than that. When the Scriptures speak of 'always giving thanks' and it being 'more blessed to give than receive' they don't just have in mind a net effect on our world. This is the lifestyle we're called to, whatever is going on in the world around us, and its goodness speaks for itself.

For instance, one of the subtly corrosive effects of consumerism is on our commitment to family and community life. This kind of thing is hard to quantify, but that doesn't mean it's not important. The idea behind Breathe is to address the whole shape of our living in a consumer culture and explore how our lives can be richer, deeper, more thankful and more faithful. These changes will have a positive ecological impact, but they shouldn't be reduced to this.



4. The 'Slow Food' movement started I believe in Italy. Is your movement a sort of whole life equivalent, to do with really appreciating the life, people and surroundings we have?

We love the thinking behind Slow Food. If we can just appreciate what we have a bit more fully, we'll be less susceptible to marketing. If we can appreciate our surroundings more, we can steward them better and resist the temptation to chase round the world in pursuit of the lifestyle dream.

It all springs from appreciation and delight – from believing that the world God made is good and his gift to us. The frenetic and wasteful pattern of consumerism is ill-fitted to this kind of world. As Christians we are free instead to savour and enjoy things for what they are. We don't need to cram in the maximum number of life experiences before we die, because we believe that God can meet us in the sacredness of each moment, in the gift and act of love, and that his purposes for us extend way beyond a lifetime's consumption.

5. A lot of what is involved in ecological living can be rather a chore. Is it a joyful chore for you?

I think there's a Cross-resurrection dynamic of cost and joy. Some of the choices we have made (though we are very much beginners in ecological living) have been costly, but they have led to joy. For instance, turning down our thermostat has helped us to appreciate the privilege of heating more. In the same way, walking and riding more frequently has helped us feel more connected to our community and to bump into our neighbours more frequently!

6. 'Not shopping' is sometimes characterised as a betrayal of the economy. What do you say to that? How do you fill the spiritual gap of not making new purchases?

Living simply doesn't necessarily mean buying less; it could just mean buying differently. For instance, we can use our purchasing decisions to create 'green collar' jobs, to buy local or Fair Trade. All these pump money into the economy, but they also shape how the economy works. The same is true of buying products that are better made (and therefore less wasteful) or, of course, buying things to give away! We do need to engage in a serious debate about the effectiveness of free market capitalism for the environment and the poor, but there are plenty of ways we can work within the system to embody the values of the kingdom of God.

In the long run, retail therapy is about as effective for our spiritual health as leech therapy is for our physical health! As soon as we have bought something new, the sheen begins to fade and the gap we have plugged begins to gape again. I think it's about taking delight in the things money

can't buy, and developing truly satisfying practices in life (like good company, appreciation of our environment, and creative skills). And, of course, it's about training our desire and delight on God and his kingdom. In the long run, it's only if we hunger and thirst after this that we'll be truly satisfied.

Suspect Your Images

David Thistlethwaite

Discussing future JRI conferences, the idea of an Agriculture conference came up. 'But people are not interested in agriculture', someone said. 'You would have to call it something else'. There is truth in this; and it raises interesting questions. Few of us can go a day without eating. And yet we feel little connection with the source of our food. As moderns, we really do not seem to 'know' where food comes from. Our image of agriculture is disconnected from modern life. That has implications when we are asked to take an interest in agricultural policy. 'Food will always come from somewhere', we think. 'The market will supply it'. The fact that it still has to be grown, not always in industrial conditions but on land, subject to climate and weather, sometimes with backbreaking toil, by people who are paid but who are still doing it 'for us', does not suit the clean and abstract market image.



The disconnection between consumption and production has been slowly changing with the Fair Trade movement. We are much better at feeling gratitude for those who pick our tea or coffee. Some of the most potent images of modernity, where the global South essentially acts as servant to the North, are beginning to crack. But images are

persistent. How do we see modern life, and our entitlements within it? I recently came across the great Russian science-fiction satire *We*, the precursor of Orwell's *1984*, written in Stalin's time by Yevgeny Zamyatin. The future world he visualises is totally created by technology. People are 'numbers', buildings are steel and glass (and surveillance near total), and even sunlight is modified. There is no visible nature. Food is distilled from petroleum. But this perfect, geometrical, world has a boundary, 'the Green Wall'. Outside the wall, where no one is permitted, are the remains of the old world, of forests, animals, light and shade, and survivors of a pre-technological race.

The book *We* resonates strongly today because it is now easy to visualise the steel and glass city, and we know the divide of modernity from nature. We have learnt to glamorise the city, and our images of power; of the corporations and finance houses, are inseparable from mental pictures of 'iconic' glass offices set in cities from which any remembrance of nature is startlingly absent. Windows look out on windows, and people operate in an abstracted world where New York, Tokyo



and Dubai are expected to be interchangeable. But the people in these offices still eat; and the buildings themselves consume energy which has to come from somewhere. The abstracted world of power cannot exist apart from the real world of earth, sea and sky; it just pretends to.

The challenge for us is to question our images. Polished glass and marble image a world in which systems work smoothly and 'human resources' function as accurately as machines. The Madoff fraud and other scandals have shown how deceptive such images can be, and remind us that the human heart is not as clear as glass. But news events come and go, while images powerfully remain. What are our ideals of life, and how do we understand power?

It is not for nothing that the Second Commandment forbids all images. God gave us two pictures to go by; 'his image' in mortal man, and the creation which is his handiwork. All the rest we have added. When we put systems, ideals, 'free markets' and other theories, even religious ideals over actual people in their actual existence we are living by images we have created. When we turn aside from the messages that nature herself gives – of which Climate Change is one of the loudest – we are in fact refusing the voice of God. But if we do so, it is often because our images of the good life, of unrestricted travel and endless new products, have given a sense of entitlement which is hard to shift. Nature, from which all these goods come, tells us otherwise.

The most potent image which our culture, and all cultures, has devised, is that goods flow upwards to those with power. Freedom comes from owning, and is expressed by buying. Ever-increasing ownership is the greatest freedom. Our modern economics, of extracting the most with the least cost, and our crude space-greedy skyscrapers, convey this perfectly. But Jesus, who actually has all power and authority (Matthew 28: 18), has shown us that this view of power is false. The only true and perfect 'image' of God has demonstrated that with real power, benefit flows downwards. Power saves, power lifts up, power gives. 'He has filled the hungry with good things'.

There is no way that an economics or a lifestyle that is out of touch with people or nature has any future. It may indeed extract benefit for a time, and have an illusion of success and power. But its true image is not one of steele perfection but one of metal-hearted greed. So those who are remembering farmers or starting allotments, battling weeds with hand-tools, or caring about small amounts of energy, are not aligning themselves with life's failures. They are moving from illusion, dangerous illusion, to reality.



Announcing the JRI Associates Event Pre-Copenhagen Consultation

November 18th 2009

Arthur Rank Centre, Stoneleigh Park, Coventry

Updates from Sir John Houghton FRS,

Ben Niblett (Tearfund Campaigns Team Leader)

Richard Weaver (Tearfund Environment and Disaster

Relief Team Leader) *and others*

Prayer, Discussion, Action

Flourishing Dewi Hughes

All of us can make piecemeal changes to our lifestyle, following good information and our environmental conscience. But what is the overall scope of what we are aiming at? What sort of lifestyle does God intend for us?

At the last Redcliffe Conference, we invited **Dr Dewi Hughes**, the Theological Adviser to Tearfund, to speak on 'Biblical Flourishing'. His paper is now available on www.jri.org.uk in an expanded version. Here are just a few gleanings and reflections from it.

We know what it is for a plant to flourish, or even for a child: both need nurture within, and protection without. At the end of the Bible is a prophetic picture which gives something of the same idea. Dr Hughes began by looking the place of perfect flourishing, the Heavenly City in the book of **Revelation**, which is the church's destiny.

Flourishing involves both what is inside the city and what is outside. Inside is the Lamb, who is its light and who replaces the temple. This shows that central to flourishing is a reconciled relationship with God, through Christ's sacrifice. This heart of a flourishing life is non-material: 'A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions' (Luke 12:15). A healthy life continues in this light where no sin can hide. But the city is also a safe place. Outside it are all possible causes of oppression: sorrow, injustice, all causes of pain and crying. This shows that to enable people and communities to flourish, we need both to bring reconciliation with God, and deal with the external evils which may hamper their growth. A third aspect we may gain from Revelation is that flourishing is communal, not individual: we flourish together as we look out for the whole. The City is a community of God's people.

Dr Hughes then took us back through the Bible, showing us how each stage leads up to this great endpoint. **The Law**

shows us that the 'land' (including property and talents) that God gives for our provision is not 'private' in the modern sense, but held in trust by each family, for use but not absolute ownership. It is also to provide for the poor and the wild animals. So 'flourishing' includes being generous and not regarding our property as absolutely ours. It also involves caring for the well-being of the whole community, leaving no-one out.

The **Sermon on the Mount** shows us that the 'poor in spirit', who may actually be poor, can have a perspective that is richer, because it is rich in God, than that of their satisfied neighbours. But the Bible never praises poverty as such. As Jesus' mother Mary says, 'He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty'. The poor in spirit are to be filled with food *and* with the things of God. This shows us that we should not spiritualize necessity, nor put private wealth anywhere near wealth in God.

The book of **Acts** shows how, after Pentecost, this teaching was put into practice. The church took responsibility to care for the needy among its members, particularly widows, but so as not to create a dependency culture, its members were encouraged to work. Earning enough to be able to give represented material flourishing at its highest. There are warnings (e.g. James 3:5) that those resting in their riches may be in spiritual danger.

Biblical flourishing, then, is dwelling in this present life with God, receiving our necessities, and having opportunities to give and care for Christ's body and the world as a whole. It includes being delivered from, and freeing others from, all forms of slavery and oppression, until that day comes when there shall be no death, 'neither mourning, nor crying, nor pain' (Revelation 21:4).

David Thistlethwaite

Waste Penney/Hale

It seems only a few years ago that our family was lent a house in Switzerland, and discovered a recycling regime that was very strict compared to our own. The basement of the house was full of containers for different wastes, and strict instructions had been left for us about sorting! In the UK at that time, everything went in the bin. We felt sure the Swiss approach was the right one; but at the same time slightly resented the new chores! Our habits in the UK have changed profoundly since that time. Probably all of us spend more time looking at rubbish than we used to. Perhaps we do not always enjoy it. But how much has been achieved! A staggering 35% of the UK's domestic waste is now sent for recycling. And what is more, a gradual but profound attitude change has occurred towards what we discard. No longer do we think we have a right to dispose of matter, of elements of God's good creation, at will. We understand profoundly that what we think of as 'waste' can have a purpose. That helps us think about plastic waste and packaging waste, but also 'wasted lives', and people who have been treated like waste, quite differently.

A JRI Associate, **Simon Penney**, who helped us organize our Waste Conference in 2005, recently founded a charity called **Promise Chasers** (www.promisechasers.ca). From its website you can purchase beautiful articles made from materials collected in the waste mountains of the Philippines, by people who live on, or next to these rubbish

dumps. Out of what has been discarded comes beauty and dignity, and also an income for those who have so little.

Disposal of modern waste is seldom simple, and there are those who question whether it is worthwhile to recycle in a recession when materials prices have collapsed. But there is a big difference between the question of profits, which indeed may suffer slumps in an imperfect and developing market, and the question of whether it is intrinsically worth doing to re-use materials, and keep them out of landfill. For up to date information on waste and disposal, **Rev Jon Hale's** monthly *Stewarding the Earth's Resources* (www.earthresources.org.uk) and the WRAP website (www.wrap.org.uk) are both excellent, and full of encouraging news items, such as that the environmental impact of 'single-use plastic bags' has already been reduced by 40%. Plastic bags are thinner, more often made from recycled materials, and we use fewer of them. Our small changes of habit, multiplied, create a significant benefit, not just for land and resource use, but for the wildlife that is affected.

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