

Who is my Neighbour?

Caroline Spelman MP, *Jesus and the Earth*, 8th February 2003

I am so grateful for the opportunity to speak to you at your conference. I was attracted by the title “Jesus and the Earth”. Actually, I don’t get many opportunities to speak to a Christian audience about International Development which is surprising considering that we are raised in our churches with the importance of giving to the world’s poor and prayers for their relief.

I chose as my title “Who is my Neighbour?” because it is the question put to Jesus by an expert in the law in Luke 10.29 and it gives Jesus the opportunity to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan by way of an answer.

It is a good and pertinent question for us today. With increasing globalisation people are brought closer together. Images of life in very poor countries are beamed into our homes, and images of our comparative affluence are beamed, well maybe into the old TV set in the street corner café.

September 11th brought home this message that people who live thousands and thousands of miles away may have a direct impact on our daily lives, and to neglect the suffering of others can have terrible consequences for both of us. I am not saying by that that poverty breeds terrorism but it makes innocent people vulnerable to manipulation as we see in many parts of the world that we are afraid of now.

As Shadow Secretary of State my job means treating everyone as my neighbour so let me introduce you to a few.

Meet the Tajik widow I got to know in the Jalozii refugee camp on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. She looked ancient crouched beneath a tent made of sacks roughly stitched together. In fact she was my age with 5 children to feed. She rifled through my briefcase looking for food. “What good are you to me?” she said, “You come, you look, you go and I am no better off.” She’s right and I made sure to bring her food next time. I did not realise till visited this camp of 60,000 people that there are two types of camp: the official ones set up by UNHCR and serviced by aid agencies, and unofficial camps like this one where supplies of food were intermittent. “The problem”, said the widow “is that I do not have a man to fight to the front of the queue for me and by the time I get there there is none left.”

Throughout the Bible, we are urged to ‘plead the case of the widow’ as Isaiah puts it (1:17). With so much conflict there are many female-headed households who struggle to provide for their families.

What should our response be to this Tajik neighbour? As a country, we allocate ~£334 million for the relief of refugees, and by comparison we spend £1.2billion on

them once they get here. It is clear that much more needs to be done to help the 50 million refugees around the world.

Meet Stephen, my neighbour from Malawi. He is raising his two younger brothers on his own. His parents both died of Aids and his youngest brother contracted the disease when breastfed by his mum. This is the third year of severe drought but in a quirk of nature there have been floods too. We might observe these two extremes of nature are fairly clear evidence of global warming. He doesn't have the energy to think about this, being at the end of his coping mechanisms. The food shortage is at its worst right now and their diet consists of wild roots foraged to supplement the meagre amounts of maize he has.

What should our response be to Stephen? He obviously needs food but can we get it to him? His government 'lost' 15,000 tonnes of maize given for food relief by the European Union last year. Corruption is rife and the most vulnerable suffer. His brother needs treatment and if he lived in our country he would receive the life-extending drugs, anti-retroviral. But it would cost Stephen US \$100 a year which he does not have. Most likely it is not Aids but an opportunistic infection like TB which will claim his brother.

I believe we need a major change of heart about such Aids orphans. The scale of the Aids pandemic in Southern Africa will hold the continent back from development. It is a disease which wipes out the most economically active, the parents, the teachers, nurses, doctors, public servants. Even they cannot afford treatment. I have proposed that we should at very least provide free anti-retroviral drugs to HIV+ pregnant women together with the supporting healthcare so that Stephen's mum might not have passed the disease to her baby. Beyond that I believe we should try to mainstream child sponsorship so that for each of our children we give an Aids orphan a better quality of life.

Meet my neighbour Abdul, he lives in Baghdad. His aunt has a TV set and night after night government propaganda warns him that war is imminent. He is too young to remember the last war but its scars are all around him. He is dependent on food rations and his mum has stockpiled 2 months of these in case of war. She tells him that last time there was no food or water or electricity. Actually the electricity has only just been put back on but still there is no sanitation. Many of his friends are less well off for food and the children get sick from the dirty water.

Now what should our response be? I hope it won't come to war but it looks as if it will. I feel passionately that we must urgently prepare for the humanitarian consequences of a possible war. By stark contrast to our preparations for war in Afghanistan where the Prime Minister said that humanitarian contingency should be of equal importance to military contingency, we have not heard a beep on this in relation to Iraq. I find this quite extraordinary. We have had numerous statements from the defence secretary and the foreign secretary on Iraq, but not one on humanitarian contingency. I fear that this is because there is a view that it would

make war a reality. This is crazy when we may be a matter of weeks away and there is so much that can be done. We could stockpile food, water, medicines, and dare I say, gas masks and vaccines on the borders of Iraq. When I asked Clare Short ten days ago what discussions she had had with the Governments of Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria about the possible outflux of refugees in the event of war, she said 'None'. Her heart is in the right place but this obduracy will hurt the very people we both desire to protect. There is an absolute moral imperative to act.

Back to the theme of your conference, 'Jesus and the Earth'. What would Jesus do looking at our world today? He would weep and I think he would be angry. He would challenge us and he would turn our tables over.

We, in the developed world have caused many of the problems now facing developing countries. Our help is half-hearted.

We proffer help with debts but debt relief is failing. I expect many of you took part in the Jubilee Debt Campaign to cancel debts in the Millennium. I joined the human chain round the city of Birmingham when the world's leaders came for the G8 summit. They responded and we were led to believe that upward of 20 countries would have their debts cancelled. The fact is only 6 countries have been completely debt relieved. Why? Because the process of relieving debt is flawed. It takes no account of exogenous shocks to the economies of the indebted countries. The collapse in commodity prices has drastically reduced the income of many indebted countries and now their debt relief is not on a sustainable footing.

What to do? We must reform the debt relief process. It needs to be quicker, simpler and much more realistic about the income generating capacity of each country. There are some sad cases. Take Ethiopia where 14 million people face starvation. We gave them £12.3 million in overseas aid over the last 12 months but they gave us £15million in debt. We give with one hand and snatch back with the other.

There is more to do: until we reform the rules that govern world trade to allow developing countries access to our markets they will not be able to generate enough income to clear the debts and take their economies forward.

The Common Agricultural Policy is one of the worst offenders. It no longer even guarantees our own farmers a reasonable income. America is just as bad, passing a bill to grant an extra \$100bn of subsidy.

The half-heartedness or hard-heartedness of the developed world reached absurd heights at the Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development. Ten years on from the Summit in Rio, it did not even firm up those missed targets. There were no new targets on fighting poverty, improving standards of health or education. It did not look at the problem of Aids or conflict. There was no discussion of trade rules, improving debt relief or standards of governance. It was a terrible missed

opportunity. The one new target “to halve the number of people without drinking water by 2010” had already been agreed in the millennium declaration but it is not legally binding and there are no sanctions if it is not met. The same is true for the parallel target of halving the number of people without access to sanitation”

I could sum this up with the prayer that says ‘Lord, we have left undone the things that we ought to have done’. It was characterised by the sin of omission. To conclude, in reply to the question ‘What must I do to inherit eternal life’, Jesus quoted two commandments: to love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and love your neighbour as yourself.”

As yourself, do you stand up as a good neighbour? Do we as a nation stand as a good neighbour? I hope I have demonstrated that it could be better.

We all have to face the challenge that when Jesus comes again and judges us we will need to answer some tough questions. I hope we will be with the righteous who did not even notice that they had fed and clothed and sheltered the Lord, and not receiving his indictment.

“For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me”.

That is the challenge. We need to respond.