

Tablet - February 2010



It was a breakfast talk on the global economy on a wintry morning in London. The weather forecast was bad. But a warm and elegant room in a centre for foreign affairs in St James Square London welcomed an elite group of people who try to see further into the future. Apart from me the audience was made up of those with insights through journalism, economics, finance or business into where the world was going.

They wanted to test and deepen their own thoughts by listening to the visiting speaker, a friend of mine, admired in his field, by listening in to his broad and detailed perspective through his role in a global bank.

These were not the political power-brokers of the world's economy but the knowledge-brokers, the ones who informed the decision-makers. They were soft-spoken not speech-makers. They put forward two or three possible theories and explained why one was to be preferred ? if you needed to choose. But they knew what they knew and seemed free of the self-interested self-deception and word-play of the politician or the profit-driven motive of the investor. They didn't have to swing public-opinion or get re-elected.

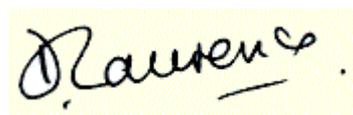
We talked about crisis in a calm, relaxed tone. They had that confident modesty of experts who are fascinated by their subject for its own sake ? like a carpenter concentrated on his craft, not by what the table he is making will be sold for. There was an academic air of precision, restraint and courtesy. Everyone knew there was no one explanation or simple solution. Here you could understand that the Chinese had not scuttled the Copenhagen talks for mere selfishness. It was that their over-riding and passionate social goal is the eradication of their own bitter poverty. Nothing would be allowed to hinder that immediate goal, even climate change. So, even at this level, choice is always moral - the conflict of interest between your own family and the needs of others is a dilemma that only wisdom and courage can resolve. If your own child and a stranger's are both crying for food who do you feed first?

The conclusions that this kind of morning discussion eventually led to probably determined the price of the coffee I had with my friend afterwards, as well as where the coffee was imported from and how much the Polish waitress who served us was able to send home to her family. The great lucid abstractions of the experts are not, despite appearances, wholly other-worldly. And the quality of consciousness, the spiritual awakening and personal integrity of such

thinkers impact the lives of those to whom the price of a coffee and public transport and the rate of the minimum wage are daily concerns. My friend was speaking about the global shifts following the recession, not about spirituality. But when he spoke about the failure of the global banking system to reform itself after the iniquities of the past few years I thought I could sense a tone and sensitivity that reflected a contemplative experience of truth ? not just a statement based on statistics. Maybe it is, after all, these subtler gradations of experienced truth that shape the interpretation of data and that ultimately determine whether the world is a more or less just place after we have done our work in it.

My brief encounter with the wise men and women of global economics set me thinking of the distance between the great and the small. How inflamed and tender seems this painful gulf between Dives and Lazarus that is found in the archaeology of the first human settlements and reflected in the house prices of different parts of any modern city. Then I found myself in a remote parish of rural Queensland newly and briefly green after heavy rains. I was with an extraordinary pastoral Bishop, Brian Heenan, who was greeted warmly as 'Father' by the small congregations we travelled many hundreds of kilometres by car to visit. We baptised four-month old Jonah in a mining town called Capella. Brian and I talked about the Church as we drove.

How remote Vatican squabbles seem to the Christian life of these simple communities. Yet the same gulf, the same endemic and painful injustices exist in the Church. In this respect it is just another part of the world, another global institution. But I also felt ? I hoped ? when Jonah opened his eyes as the water flowed over his head, that we could witness, albeit intermittently and weakly, to the fact that this ancient gulf between human beings that causes all our worst failures of humanity is bridgeable. Nothing shows this better than Christ, the bridge between rich and poor, the mighty and the unvoiced, the professor and the bulldozer-driver. And the church, really, is only he who is this bridge.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Laurence Freeman OSB

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Tablet Newsletter

Source URL: <http://www.wccm.org/content/tablet-february-2010>