Justice and Eschatology – A Response to Dr Dewi Hughes

Dr Jonathan Ingleby, Honorary Fellow, Redcliffe College

Dr Hughes’ Redcliffe Lecture, ‘Global Mission and Justice’ raises, in the context of justice, the long and difficult debate concerning Biblical eschatology. Does post-millennialism (the ‘Puritan Hope’) actually work? Are we really in the process of establishing ‘the peaceable kingdom’? What about Isaiah 11 with its sweeping promises? Is this simply a vision of the millennial reign after the return of Christ, that is, are the pre-millennialists essentially right? What then do we do about justice issues in the here and now?

William Carey’s case is both inspiring and perplexing. His vision was truly magnificent and in some ways he lived it out – see the range of achievements associated with the Serampore fellowship as described by Dr Hughes. But even here hard realism demands that we take notice of the fact that the long-term effects were limited. His ‘kingdom community’ was undoubtedly ‘a sign of the kingdom’ but this is not quite the same thing as leaven that is destined to spread until it ‘leavens the whole lump’ (Matthew 13:33). As far as India is concerned while we can still hope for signs of the kingdom (and these to be given not only by churches and mission organisations) will India ‘be won for Christ’ as Dr Hughes suggests still might be possible? If this question itself sounds faithless, what about past claims that the kingdom of Christ had indeed been established on a territorial and universal basis? For example, the Holy Roman Empire in Western Europe thought of itself in this way. The truth is, however, that the idea of Christendom lies in disarray, and nobody is making such claims today. Indeed many Christians view the passing of the idea of Christendom with relief.

Does ‘the kingdom now but not yet’, the idea, popularised by George Eldon Ladd that the Kingdom was inaugurated by Christ and we can already experience its manifestations, but we must await the Second Coming for its consummation, help us here? I believe it does though it does not resolve all our dilemmas. What this amounts to is a two phase approach: demonstration and achievement. The sobering thought is that as far as justice is concerned, and indeed for any other matter, the first is much easier than the second. As Dr Hughes points out, there have been some significant demonstrations in our day. He was understandably enthusiastic, for example, about the work done by Jubilee 2000. What tends to be less impressive is the level of achievement as a result of these demonstrations. Has the debt situation (the main focus of Jubilee 2000) improved significantly and is it seen as ‘kingdom work’ when it has? Similar questions could be asked of the Make Poverty History movement and the Micah Challenge. Has demonstration led to achievement? More widely, what about the universality of Isaiah 11? Consider the saying in Revelation that ‘the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ’ (Revelation 11:15). To put it rather simplistically, when can we expect that to happen?

At this point I would like to revert to the familiar categories of post- and pre-millennialism, and I have a suggestion. We might be able to use either framework to describe a particular historical situation. Thus, about certain times and/or places one could say that they are in
post-millennialist mode. The Peaceable Kingdom is beginning to be demonstrated and achieved and this to a degree that goes beyond being ‘a sign’, and no more. Here are some examples, though for all these times and places one could also mention continuing imperfections (injustices) or even new ones introduced:-

- The spread of the Christian faith through the Roman Empire introducing a far more humane attitude in such matters as infanticide, care for widows, renunciation of violence etc.
- The monastic movement with its demonstration of evangelism, community and practical ethics.
- The Reformation and its growth of ‘good nationalism’ whereby people began to access their faith through their own culture and read the Bible for themselves in their own language.
- The Evangelical Revival with improved standards in public life, the abolition of the slave trade, prison reform etc.
- The Modern Missionary Movement with its emphasis on the gospel for all nations, women’s education, better medical care, etc.
- Today it might be the growth of the church in the Global South, although, from a justice point of view the news is not necessarily all that good.

Equally there are times and/or places when the better way to look at the situation is from a (modified) pre-millennialist perspective. One can see that a given civilisation is heading for destruction, or has the seeds of its own destruction in it. Jesus foresaw this doomsday scenario for the people of his day, and, as I understand it, saw ‘the coming of the Son of Man’ for his generation as the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Similarly, John of Patmos saw the Roman Empire (‘Babylon’ – see chapter 18 of John’s Apocalypse) as approaching final collapse.

There are some points I would like to add about this latter perspective – particularly important because I believe we are in one such situation ourselves today. Even in situations of evident decline the Peaceable Kingdom and its justice must always be sought (Matthew 6:33). The withdrawal aspect of the pre-millennialist approach is completely unacceptable. Firstly, because the nature of the Kingdom is always to be potentially an unexpected scene-changer. The mustard seed becomes the big tree – who would have thought it? In Communist China after the revolution the seed of the gospel was buried, but by no means ‘dead and buried’. At the end of the colonial period who would have forecast the amazing growth of the church in sub-Saharan Africa? Justice is very quiet (Matthew 12:18-20). The justice that Jesus brought began as something apparently insignificant; indeed at the cross ‘his justice was taken away’ (Acts 8:33). But that was not the end of the story. Secondly, because success is not really the issue. I wish Dr Hughes had said something about the justice ventures which, despite everything, failed. How do we account for the fact that the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 (‘the end of the Conference is the beginning of the conquest’ said John Mott) was succeeded
by the First World War? Thirdly, it is perfectly proper to bewail the lack of justice, and to warn people about the consequences of injustice, even in the blackest situation. (‘An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule as the prophets direct; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?’ Jeremiah 5:30-1)

We need in all circumstances to demonstrate that justice is our watchword. ‘Let justice be done, though the heavens fall’, as the Roman maxim has it. Justice is not only for the good times and it is not only for the bad times. It expresses the character of the God whom we serve.

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