

Small is Beautiful

I recall one late morning in the apathy of my adolescence lying on my bed waiting for the day to declare itself to me. Unable to apply myself to anything with conviction I started then what I have developed now, namely an interest in what others deemed meaningful.

We are all subject to the interests and hobbies of our guardians and in many ways we are exposed to our first experience of ‘personal pursuit’ through them. Many examples can be found of children who follow exactly in the footsteps of their parents but we can turn to other examples to prove the contrary. We can think of individuals like Pietro di Bernardone dei Moriconi, a prosperous silk merchant in the 13th century who expected his son to follow in his footsteps. Unfortunately for him his son was St. Francis of Assisi.

The nature/nurture debate will always rage on but we hear in the wisdom literature in the scriptures that one can learn a lot from the senior members of your family or community “My child, guard the commands of your father and do not forsake the instruction of your mother” Proverbs 6. 20

That particular afternoon a relative of mine walked upstairs and tossed a book on my bed and told me to give it a read. I looked at it suspiciously but was intrigued by the title ‘Small is Beautiful’ by E. F Schumacher.

I thumbed through it at a reasonable pace and was surprised by its candor and insight. Its subheading is - ‘a study of economics as if people mattered’. The language of economics is enough for me usually to run a mile but the way the book addresses the reader helps you get to grips with some weighty issues.

Of course we do not have the chance to do a whole review but I encourage you to get a copy and see what you think. Its central tenant is that we have a cultural view that declares ‘bigger is better’. This way of running an economy can only be sustained for a very limited amount of time because natural resources are treated as expendable income rather than capital. He argues that if we take the needs of the world seriously and the disparity between the economies of the continents then we will have to arrive at a settlement in which we *all* develop sustainable living.

He writes: “*Economic development is something much wider and deeper than economics, let alone econometrics. Its roots lie outside the economic sphere, in education, organisation, discipline and, beyond that, in political independence and a national consciousness of self-reliance.*”

Modern man does not experience himself as a part of nature but as an outside force destined to dominate and conquer it. He even talks of a battle with nature, forgetting that, if he won the battle, he would find himself on the losing side.

The generosity of the Earth allows us to feed all mankind; we know enough about ecology to keep the Earth a healthy place; there is enough room on the Earth, and there are enough

materials, so that everybody can have adequate shelter; we are quite competent enough to produce sufficient supplies of necessities so that no one need live in misery”

We are often reminded by those invested in the ecological movement that there is a bounty that the earth can bring forth. The earth is blessed with growth and for the house of Israel, this regularity and fruitfulness was a constant blessing from God. Psalm 65. 10 *“You drench its furrows and level its ridges; you soften it with showers and bless its crops”*. Even amidst the blight of this potent virus the earth is still producing and allowing the Father’s blessings to move through its soil and rise up to feed and nourish us.

I have the convert’s zeal moving through my veins now as I have recently dug an allotment in my garden; partly as a means to pass time but also because the profundity of that small book has remained with me. Though I know I am unable to effect any real self sustenance off from my labours, time spent in the garden has proved to fulfill a deeper purpose, a rare opportunity for me to work with the ecology that has sustained me from the day I first drew breath.

We are all reminded of the fragility of life as this virus runs rampant across the globe. The mighty individual who frenetically pedals the London-centric economy has now been brought to a standstill. We are all having to live differently now. We know that this will be a temporary arrangement and our NHS staff are putting in huge levels of effort and will for which we will always be grateful and appreciative.

Recognizing that there are different models of economics and societal responsibilities may prove to be a meaningful avenue for us to explore in our attempt to ameliorate the excesses of our age. We do not know what the answers will be as we move forward from Coronavirus but we have known for some time that the pace at which life is conducted is proving too fast and resource heavy for ourselves and the planet. I know that many have identified the Coronavirus as a Malthusian manifestation caused by the excesses of our living and footprint on the earth.

As ever the biggest critique facing those who promote these alternative systems is that without power or the ear of the government there is little change that can truly be effected. Schumacher was again aware of this and identified as many thinkers do the need to as it were ‘tidy ones room before setting the world aright’. He identifies greed and envy, something common to us all, as the true cause of our climate emergency:

“How could we even begin to disarm greed and envy? Perhaps by being less greedy and envious ourselves; perhaps by resisting the temptation of letting our luxuries become needs; and perhaps by even scrutinizing our needs to see if they cannot be simplified and reduced.”

This is going to be a real challenge for us as we are creatures that measure success in terms of accumulation. Nonetheless this challenge of our age is one that needs to be addressed with utmost urgency. The scaling back of our life and our needs will be painful at times as we lose

the luxuries that we've made into necessities. Yet there has been in my limited attempts a great joy in learning some of the fundamentals of ecology, in learning about new technologies and methods that can draw out interests and joys that one never knew they had.

When the lockdown is lifted might I highly recommend to you a visit to the Centre of Alternative Technology (CAT) around three miles north of Machynlleth. There you can speak with people who are truly invested in sharing their study of these alternative systems and learn some truly interesting things. The website will excite your appetite whilst we wait for the lockdown to lift.

The loss people are experiencing now is something that we would all wish to remove but we are in this situation now and our response will be critical. The solace and isolation has encouraged me and others to spend time engaged with activities we would never have had the time or inclination to entertain. That is a positive and at this time we could do with as many positives as we can get. We are in a very challenging time but with Christ there is always hope may our hearts never forget. As Christians as we go through the painful process of identifying what luxuries have become necessities perhaps we can reflect on the abundance of life that we have in Christ as Paul reminds us *“More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ”* Philippians 3. 8