

## Justin Welby's social conscience



One of the things we know about the next Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, is that he doesn't like bankers. Another is that he has given a good deal of thought to the question of social sin – a trickier concept than personal, individual failings. A third is that he has been profoundly influenced by the social teaching of a nineteenth century pope, Leo XIII, as expressed in his 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. It's available online, just twenty pages long. *Justin Welby*

That encyclical is a curious document to read now: some of it feels anachronistic (if you like women bishops, you're going to hate the bit about fathers as the natural rulers of families), much feels self evident. It starts off with a ringing denunciation of the prevailing social disorder of the time and its effects on the labouring poor: 'the hiring of labour and the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the labouring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself.'

It goes on, however, to declare in unequivocal terms, the natural human right to private property ('the practice of all ages has consecrated the principle of private ownership, as being pre-eminently in conformity with human nature'), and the folly, for workers as well as the wealthy, of any attempt to replace it with collective state ownership. All perfectly obvious, all written way ahead of the Russian revolution.

Conservatives find all this terribly congenial, ditto the emphasis that man, and the family, precede the state, and that the family 'has rights and duties peculiar to itself which are quite independent of the state' and come before those of the community in the natural pecking order. For good measure he goes on to reflect on the wretchedness of earthly life – 'nothing is more useful than to reflect on the world

as it really is.’

The bite of the thing comes more than half way through, and it’s in his reflections on the duties of employers and the rights of employees. It’s not good enough, he says, for wages to be set by a free market. ‘Wages, we are told, are regulated by free consent,’ he observes, before going on to declare that each man has a natural right to procure what is required to live. Behind any private agreement on pay, ‘there underlies a dictate of natural justice more imperious and ancient than any bargain between man and men, namely, that wages ought not to be insufficient to support a frugal and well-behaved wage earner. If through necessity or fear of a worse evil the workman accept harder conditions because an employer or contractor will afford him no better, he is made the victim of force and injustice.’

Then he goes on to assert the real good of working men’s unions, again not an entirely self-evident proposition from a pope at the time. Funnily enough, it’s his wistful invocation of the medieval trade guilds, once considered a bit pathetic in its nostalgia, which now seems rather pertinent. And I’m sympathetic myself to his view that a worker’s right to religion includes a day of rest on Sundays – has anyone, lately, tried to exercise their right to a Sabbath rest when they apply for a job in retail?

One of the most pertinent bits of *Rerum Novarum* now, of course, is its contention that an employer does not simply recruit labour; he recruits a person, with minimum human needs. And if market forces don’t deliver the means necessary for him to live with minimal decency, then the state may have to intervene.

We’re talking, obviously, about the minimum wage here and indeed about the fashionable notion of the living wage, which is significantly higher. The London living wage, for instance, is £8.55 as opposed to the minimum wage of £6.19 which has lower levels depending on age. Charles Moore, in the *Spectator*, recently made a cogent argument against the living wage on the basis that it not only made a nonsense of the concept of the minimum wage but failed to acknowledge that someone with a family had different needs from a young, single person. I’m sure Leo XIII would have agreed. But there are any number of unavoidable costs associated with living in the capital – transport is hugely expensive, and so is housing – which mean that if you’re going to live here at all, it’s next to impossible on the minimum wage.

All this is up for argument, and not just among Catholics. But it’s just one of the respects in which *Rerum Novarum* is worth considering. A little after its publication, the Anglican socialist, Henry Scott Holland, said it was ‘the voice of some old-world life...speaking in some antique tongue of long ago.’ Actually, it sounds rather pertinent in lots of respects. Let’s see how Justin Welby uses it.

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