



The Gospel of Fairtrade

In early days of the Christian Church, there was a debate about the meaning of the well-known verse in our Gospel reading: **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son....”** What did the Gospel writer John mean when he said **“the world”**? Did he mean only those who believe? Or, did he mean all people the world over?

How we answer the question reveals the kind of God we believe God to be. Is he a loving, saving God only to those who knowingly put their faith in him? Or is he the God who is love for all people the world over? John's original text uses the word “cosmos”¹: God so loved the **cosmos** ... that he gave his only son that the world may not perish but live.” Our lectionary places this reading from John's Gospel alongside a passage from Genesis 12. This tips the argument in favour of a God who includes the entire **cosmos**, all the world's people, in his saving grace. For God's promise to the world in the calling of Abraham is straightforward: “I will make you into a great blessing, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

For the churches, this is key to the message of Fairtrade Sunday, as one of the ways we, as a people of faith, become agents of God's blessing to the world. And it's a blessing the world needs. Let's take tea as a case in point.

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Because I love tea, and because I have made my pilgrimage to the Cutty Sark, — that great Victorian tea clipper now a visitor's centre in Greenwich — and because I've stood reverentially in the Twining's tea shop with its 200 year history over on the Strand—at one point I got interested in where our tea comes from. And that led me to look into the importance of Fairtrade and TraidCraft to the lives of the people who pick, pack and transport tea. And it seems to make a world of difference: to women like Linet, farmer in Kenya, with five children, struggling against government economic policies pressed on small farmers by economic interests from the wealthy nations. Linet tells Traidcraft: **“The people making these laws should come to the**

ground and see how we live. ... We are sad and we are stranded because we don't know what tomorrow will have for us. Will they come help us when we are dead?” Linet's voice is compelling, and so are the voices of people whose lives are changed when they partner with Traidcraft and Fairtrade programmes.

I want to come to that, but first a bit of context.

It turns out the majority of our black tea comes from East Africa. That was news to me; I would have said the Kerala region in southern India, but our tea comes largely from Kenya. That's where wholesale buyers for shops like Tesco and Sainsbury's keep a competitive economy at fever-pitch levels. Tea is big business for landlords, growers and traders. But there is a shadow side to the industry that brings me the cup of Lady Grey With Orange Zest I take for granted in the morning.

The reality is that the squeeze for maximum profits is a punishing business for the people who grow and harvest tea in hundreds of plantations across Kenya. Much of this work is done by the poor fleeing drought-stricken regions, and by migrant workers from neighbouring countries. Their labour generates 17 million tons of black tea that go to auction for all our major supermarkets each month. Each tea bag we drink represents someone's long working hours in harsh conditions.

But poor families with no other means of earning a living, work in the tea plantations is their only hope. These family groups often include children in their work, although child labour is illegal in Kenya. But that hasn't stopped the illegal collusion between guardians in charge of orphans and unscrupulous tea growers, and the deployment of small hands over twelve to fourteen hour days in what are otherwise beautiful, lush plantations across tea-growing highlands.¹

¹ The data was gathered from the documentary 'The Tea Trail with Simon Reeve' originally aired in 2014: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/3KyyFTDG8q7xFL0tzvsWt97/the-tea-trail-with-simon-reeve>.

Inevitably, however, those who fare the worst are migrant workers, often labouring without working permits, and therefore with no protection under law. Migrant workers desperate for a subsistence wage are easily open to exploitation. This is a problem that God's people in the Old Testament were forced to confront when they began to take seriously God's promise to make them a blessing to the world.

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Justice in labour practices became a key principle in the Old Testament law. **God cast his eye on the most vulnerable people in society – and delivered on his promise of blessing to the world by embedding into law the protection of migrant workers and asylum seekers.** God effectively says to the people if you're going to be the people of God, and if the world is going to know who I am, — the God of love and compassion, the God who loves justice — then you need to show it in your treatment of refugees and migrant workers.

Deuteronomy 10: “For the Lord your God is might and awesome, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the foreigner – the refugee.² So you shall also love the migrant worker, the resident alien, the asylum seeker, by providing work for food and clothing, for remember that once you yourselves were strangers in a strange land” (Deut 10.17-19, glossed theologically from the original Hebrew).

Deuteronomy 24: “Do not oppress the hired labourer who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your people or a foreign worker in your land: give him his pay in the daytime, because he is poor, and his life depends on it; do not withhold his wages, lest he cry out to God and expose your sin.” (Deut 24:14-15, glossed theologically from the original Hebrew).

Now let's pause there for a moment. Because I think this puts into perspective our system of justice that doesn't allow asylum seekers to work. It only takes a conversation to recognise what this does to a person's sense of dignity and self-worth.

For God's people, justice in labour practices was a sign of faithfulness to the God who asked faithfulness of Abraham, and whose promise was given as a blessing to the world. This meant that unfair labour practices were a sin, an offence to God, an affront to God's love for the cosmos.

In the story of tea, Fairtrade and the labour practices it encourages turns out to be a beacon of hope in the global economics propping up our enjoyment of our morning or afternoon cup. So it isn't all bad news. In fact, it's very good news. Because the message from the workers on the ground, those most familiar with what drives labour practices and the realities of the tea trade, is ... **drink more tea! But make it Fairtrade.**

The word from farmers with Fairtrade certification who sell to wholesalers—but also from the many people who pick tealeaves, work the land and plant the crops—is that the demand for Fairtrade tea from the UK and elsewhere is making a difference in working practices on the farms.

The economics seem to be fairly straightforward: **the more we consume Fairtrade tea, the greater the demand for the fair labour practices required for a Fairtrade certification, and – therefore – the greater the pressure on growers to dedicate more of their plantations to just work and trade practices open to Fairtrade scrutiny.** And landowners, growers and traders are increasingly responding to the Fairtrade requirements in the tea plantations.

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Here at St James's Church, Traidcraft stall is our most immediate connection to the people whose lives are changed by Fairtrade. Betty Harris has been the leading spirit behind our Traidcraft stall for the past twenty years. Betty has gathered a strong team of volunteers who are helping us as a congregation to fight poverty by enabling producers in Africa and Asia to compete with the quality products and just labour practices in economies otherwise dominated by the power of wholesalers. And again, everything about it is telling us that having access to our buying habits really does transform people's lives.

I asked Betty what was the most important thing we needed to hear today, of Fairtrade Sunday,

² The Hebrew word “GER” – carries all these meanings. See <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/1616.htm>

and specially as we press the pause button on our stall for the summer months. For Betty, it was quite straightforward, she said — **“Tell the real life stories of people who have been helped by Traidcraft: families who are eating three times a day instead of once, or who can buy the books their children need so they can go to school, or who have been able to put an electric light in their homes so the youngsters can do their homework. Tell the congregation about the beneficiary who simply said ‘Traidcraft came into our lives like a light’.”**

Betty is speaking about a TraidCraft tea farmer in Bangladesh who is now able to provide for an extended family of ten – adding to their diet of rice, eggs, chicken, and fish. The initial investment of tea plants and training from Traidcraft has turned out a small tea garden, that is now funding a house build and family bed: **“I have never imagined that a tea plant could bring such change to so many peoples' lives.”**

Betty is speaking about people like Joyce, in Malawi, who farms sugar cane. Joyce says: **“We give praise for Fairtrade: it is doing good things here. The village where I live now receives electricity. It is very exciting. We never believed this would be possible! ... Now, we are going to cook [with electricity] ... and we will be able to use electricity for light.”** Joyce wants to provide the best for her fourteen-month-old son, Chiyembekezo. His name means ‘waiting for something good’.

Joyce believes that people in the UK can play a part in helping her son – and other sugar farming families – to have hope for something good as they grow up. Joyce says **“I want my baby to have a good future, I want to send him to high school so he may stand by himself in the future. ... I want to tell people in the UK that they make me, a sugar farmer, very happy when they buy our Fairtrade sugar.”**

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Earlier in our service, we sang responsively the words of Psalm 121. Imagine how those words might speak to someone like Joyce, farming in Malawi under the baking sun. Imagine God speaks to Joyce who, in the words of the Psalm says: **“the holy one watches over you; and is your shade, and your right hand, so that the sun shall not strike you by day, neither the moon by night. ...”**

This sounds like God who delivers on his promise of blessing to a world he has made. So, get your TraidCraft bamboo socks while they last! For the Gospel of Fairtrade and TraidCraft is that, **together we can bring justice to a world that only God can save.**

And we do this not because God hates injustice. Though of course, he does. **We do it because to born of the Spirit, – as Jesus says to Nicodemus, to be born from above – is to know the God who loves justice. Amen.**