

A theological reflection in response to Enabling Choice by the Rt Revd Dr Graham Tomlin, Vice Chair of the Archbishops' Commission on Housing, Church and Community, Director of the Centre for Cultural Witness.

One of the common words mentioned in the New Testament relating to households is the word *oikonomia*. Literally, it means the 'law of the household'. It can, at a very practical level, simply refer to the work of a household manager, an *oikonomos*, a slave in charge of other slaves, managing the affairs of the home, as in Luke 16.2-3, or even the work of an apostle (1 Cor 9.17) or bishop in Patristic texts. At other times, in the Pauline epistles, it refers in a wider theological sense to the '*economy (oikonomia) of the grace of God given to me for you*' (Eph 3.2) or the overall design of God throughout history such as the '*plan (oikonomia) for the fullness of time to gather all things in Christ*' (Eph 1.10 – see also 1 Tim 1.4).

The early fathers often spoke of the 'divine economy' – the way in which God interacts with human history and works out his purposes through (and sometimes despite) it. We are given a picture of a God who has purposes, plans and designs for his creation. The fallenness of the world introduces an element of randomness to the way things work out, yet this cannot frustrate the ultimate plan (*oikonomia*) of God to bring blessing to the whole of creation.

Planning, therefore is a feature of divine activity, from creation to new creation, from the promise in the old covenant of a Saviour who was to come, to the promise in the new covenant of a new heaven and new earth. Planning, for example for a good retirement, or having a sense of purpose and direction for the future, is an aspect of our created nature that mirrors the character of God. Of course our plans are not God's plans and we have to hold our plans lightly, as we are likely to plan unwisely, yet to plan for the future in the light of God's self-revelation in Christ is not to lack faith, it is an expression of faith.

Similarly, lending and borrowing are generally spoken of favourably in the Bible and the Christian tradition. Jesus urges his followers to "*give to everyone who begs from you and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.*" (Matt 5.42). Generous lending is commended in Luke 6.34 as a form of love for the neighbour. Basil the Great, one of the early fathers who spoke most trenchantly about social justice, warned strongly against taking on too onerous debts, but also urged that money should constantly circulate, and not be hoarded. It should be used to benefit those who have little, so that they are able to thrive: "Wealth left idle is of no use to anyone, but put to use and exchanged, it becomes fruitful and beneficial for the public."

Planning for the future is also a means of expressing love and care for those whom God has given us to care for and protect. Caring for dependents was always a core duty for followers of Christ. The household instructions in texts like 1 Timothy 5 place a high premium on duty to family, caring for widows, and those who rely on us. Trust in God for the future is a vital aspect of Christian faith. The future is in God's hands not ours, so a basic posture of joyful trust in God's providence is needed. Yet trust does not exclude planning, in so far as we are able to do so. To fail to plan ahead to ensure loved ones are cared and provided for is a lack of love, not an expression of piety.

Moreover, the divine economy, or plan, involves the idea of home. The vision at the end of the book of Revelation is that of a world where "*The home of God is among mortals: he will dwell with them; they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them*" (Rev 21.3). Christian homes, then,

whether for a young family, a flat for a single person, or a retirement home, are intended to be an echo of the day when God will make his home with us. A house is more than just a place to shelter from the elements for a short while, it has the potential to be a foretaste of the age to come, and can even be a telling of the gospel in bricks and mortar. The Archbishops' Commission on Housing, Church and Community outlined a vision for good housing of being Sustainable, Safe, Stable, Sociable and Satisfying – characteristics that arise from and reflect the gospel story of Creation, Fall, Incarnation, the Church and the promised new creation. A home like this can be a place of hospitality and welcome for others, as many clergy homes already are, as a means of extending Christian ministry, which changes shape but does not come to an end at retirement.

Our homes are one of God's great gifts to us. Yet they offer not just comfort and security in this life. They are to be a picture of life with God in the life that we hope for in the future. And so planning for a home that does just that can be seen as a key aspect of Christian discipleship as we wait with anticipation for the new creation.

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