

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

Wednesday 20th May 2020

by Willie Reid



As we endeavour to stay alert, home and away, there is much time to ponder during this lockdown. And, for us Christians, prevented from worshipping in our churches for the first time in over 800 years, it has allowed us lots of time to reflect and to think of others less fortunate. For example, according to Oxfam, the gap between the richest and poorest across the globe has never been greater. Today Oxfam calculates that the world's 2,153 billionaires have the same wealth as the poorest 4.6bn people who make up 60% of the planet's population. As Bob Geldof might say this is absurd and morally repulsive!

Oxfam's answer is that the world economy is broken and needs fixing by higher taxes on individuals and corporations. That may, in theory, be the answer but in practice it is unlikely to happen. But is it wise to tax too heavily anyway? Great wealth should not necessarily be condemned as long as it has been honestly gained and is used well.

For Andrew Carnegie, the Scot who made his fortune investing in the American railroads, and was the richest man of his day, there was no debate about this. This vast wealth should not be hoarded for 'the man who dies rich, dies disgraced' And he certainly put his money where his mouth was in, for example, the building of libraries in many US and British towns and cities more than 100 years ago.

And today that deep concern for others continues to be shown by two of the world's richest people: Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, and his wife Melinda.

Together, in 2000, they set up the Gates Foundation which focuses on improving people's health and wellbeing, expanding educational opportunities and helping individuals lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty in the developing world. Together, and separately, for the last 20 years, they have travelled the world talking to HIV positive prostitutes, trying to eradicate diseases such as polio and tuberculosis, chivvying leaders of rich countries to increase their overseas aid budgets whilst encouraging governments in developing countries to start to get their act together, especially on health matters. And now they are investing much in research into the coronavirus. For them, all lives have equal value.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to which the family have already donated US\$36bn (£29.5bn), takes the giving of aid so seriously that they assiduously track every dollar to ensure it buys what it is intended to and is good value.

The largest area for investment has always been health with large sums given over to control infectious diseases, malaria and TB. Massive sums have also been made available to supply condoms to women so that they should not be forced to get pregnant over and over again. In this way women gain control over their bodies and they will

make different choices that will effect not only their families but their communities and, in time, their countries. Organisations receiving the most funding from the Gates Foundation are GAVI, the public-private global health partnership committed to increasing access to immunisation in poor countries; World Health Organisation and The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Few people have ever been in the position to change the world but in the case of Bill Gates he has not only done it once (with Microsoft) but twice with his crusade against poverty and disease. And Africa, and the developing world, owe him, and his wife, a huge debt of gratitude.

But, incredibly, the couple have gone even further. Together with Warren Buffet, chair of Berkshire Hathaway, the US multinational investment company, who has also given much of his wealth away, they have also signed up more than 175 American billionaires to do likewise as part of the 'Giving Pledge.' In the US philanthropy seems to be celebrated as part of the nation's culture with an estimated 98% of top taxpayers giving, on average, 7.4% of their income to charity whilst 35% of American workers give to charity through the tax-efficient payroll system.

Forget fake news. In these disconcerting and challenging times it is truly therapeutic to find people like Bill and Melinda Gates who are passionately committed to making the world a better place for everyone to live in. And as such their endeavour is surely a shining example of true leadership emanating from America.

And it seems Bill plans to continue to be involved as his days are still laid out on a minute-by-minute schedule and he still reads a book every week to accumulate more knowledge.

One of my grandmother's favourite biblical quotes was 'whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might.' Ecclesiastes 9:10. I think it can be said that these two inspiring people are certainly doing just that!

Willie Reid

www.just1world.org