

What Exactly are We Born Into?  
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Rev. Peter Foss

In an Exit Poll taken during the recent election by Faith in Public Life and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, voters indicated that they believed the “most urgent moral problem facing American culture” is poverty and economic justice. That makes me very happy - that large numbers of people are not only recognizing such disparity, but voting with it in mind. While the Iraq War topped the list as the issue most affecting one’s vote, it’s somehow rewarding to know that people are becoming more and more aware of the way poverty and economic justice contribute to the failure of a society. And that it is viewed as a moral issue!

I want to read the words of the Prophet Amos. Amos lived in Israel, in the Kingdom of Judah. He was not of royal blood, but came from the small town of Tekoa and was a herdsman. These words were written around 750 BC.

“Listen to this, you who trample on the needy and try to suppress the poor people of the country, you who say, ‘When will the New Moon be over so we can sell our corn, and the Sabbath also, so that we can market our wheat? Then by lowering the bushel, raising the shekel, by swindling and tampering with the scales, we can buy up the poor for money, and the needy for a pair of sandals, and get a price even for the sweepings of the wheat.’ Our God swears by the Book of Jacob, ‘Never shall I forget a single thing you have done.’” (Amos 8)

When I listen to Amos angrily denouncing those of privilege, I value his warning, because he seems to speak from personal experience. Perhaps he, himself, has felt the injustice of those who seek to take advantage of his labors by buying cheaply and selling at a huge profit. Perhaps Amos was offered some of the leftover wheat that the rich tried to force upon the poor. Most importantly, he views this as a moral tragedy. Otherwise he would not bring God into the discussion; his God swears that such indiscretions will never be forgotten

Last weekend, while you were here, Linda and I went to Bar Harbor. Quite a place Bar Harbor! The views are fabulous. The downtown is lined with wonderful shops and fabulous eateries. Incredibly beautiful carriage roads that you can hike or bike on. Nothing better than enjoying chowder, popovers and lemonade at the Jordan Pond House on a sunny day! However, if you look carefully as you drive the hour from Belfast to Ellsworth, you have to wonder how people survive. Front yards dotted with broken down vehicles and piles of trash. Modest homes, many in need of paint and repair. You cannot help but wonder how the residents make a living. The land is cold and barren. The conditions are harsh. Winter is coming!

In Orland, you pass a sign that reads H.O.M.E, which stands for Homemakers Organized for More Employment. Lucy Poulin, a Catholic Sister of Mercy, founded H.O.M.E. some 36 years ago as a ministry to the poor in this rural Maine climate. I don’t know how many people they have sheltered; delivered wood to; brought into the thrift shop; shared food with, helped find employment through the sale of craft ware. Thousands I would guess. I do know that this small, but vital ministry to the needy has overseen a volunteer effort that has now built over 60 homes. Something like Habitat for Humnaity, they have enabled those who could never, ever entertain the thought of being a homeowner to truly own their own home.

We stop at the H.O.M.E. store and buy Hard Candies made of maple syrup. I think I walk into their store, as much as anything, to feel grounded in their mission. To remind myself that, while Bar Harbor is pleasant, the prophets and saints in our midst always call us to a far different reality. That our God will not forget how we have treated (or more to the point as Amos sees it) mistreated the poor.

Earlier I retold the story from the Book of Samuel. The story of Hannah yearning for a child, a son. Hannah comes before the great priest Eli, thinking her petitions before him might become an answered prayer. The Bible makes it clear that she is pouring out her soul before the Lord. In so doing, Hannah truly represents all women (and men really) whose greatest and noblest desire is to bring a new human life into this world. To nurture a child with the song of love so that he or she will reap the benefits of a life created by God.

Giving birth is an act of hope on our part – that our children might grow up in relative security and prosperity and serve the Lord God. As parents to our children, we are all well aware that there are never any guarantees. Obviously a child born in Darfur faces an uncertain future, lacking the opportunity and possibility of a child born, say, on the road to Bar Harbor. Yet, throughout the world we continue to give birth. It would be contemptible for us not to hope that our children will live in a world of plenty and see the promises of a day of peace.

What future lies ahead for our children and our children's children? That depends ever so greatly on how we view things. Whether, as a faithful society, we do see poverty as a moral issue. There will always be a risk involved in bringing children into this world. Yet, Amos was correct in saying that our God will remember everything we do that effects the poor. When it comes to confronting poverty in our land and throughout the world...it can be accomplished. Our society is not without the means to eradicate that which demeans human integrity. Poverty fails to educate the mind and nourish the body. It deprives the soul of spirit. It strips a child (any young person) of the sense of future. And there is nothing more devastating than growing into adulthood as a person living without hope.

Hannah, as parents tend to do, dedicates Samuel to the Lord. "For this child I prayed...therefore I now lend him to the Lord for as long as he lives." As the church of Jesus Christ, we must live to ensure that all our children are freed from the chains of poverty, so that they will know they are valued by God. Through love and self-worth, they are the future that will bring about the age of peace.