

## About the author

Rt Revd and Rt Hon Richard Chartres became the 132nd Bishop of London in November 1995.

He is President of Bible Society, an Honorary Bencher of the Middle Temple, Chairman of the Ecumenical 'London Church Leaders', a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and is associated with numerous other organisations.



He is founder and life president of St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace. His publications include *The History of Gresham College 1597-1997* (with David Vermont) and *Tree of Knowledge, Tree of Life* (2005) and many articles and essays especially on religion and the environment.

He is married to Caroline, a freelance writer, and they have four children – Alexander, Sophie, Louis and Clio.

Bible Society  
Stonehill Green  
Westlea  
Swindon  
SN5 7DG

[biblesociety.org.uk](http://biblesociety.org.uk)  
Charity Reg. No 232759



Bible Society  
congratulates our  
patron Her Majesty  
The Queen on the  
occasion of her  
Diamond Jubilee



## Jubilee then and now

### A big idea for the 21st century

Rt Revd and Rt Hon Richard Chartres  
Bishop of London



Picture CC from RenA© Ehrhardt on Flickr



## Jubilee!

We have been here before – but only once.

Only once in history have the British ever celebrated a Diamond Jubilee. That was in 1897 when Queen Victoria celebrated 60 years on the throne. It was a moment of imperial pride and spectacle. Royalty and Prime Ministers from across the empire and beyond came to London to join a magnificent procession. There was a thanksgiving service at St Paul's Cathedral, although at 78, the Queen was too infirm to leave her carriage and the clergy and congregation came out of the Cathedral to celebrate on the steps.

Our own Queen will come to St Paul's to give thanks at a service – this time inside – for her Diamond Jubilee. In the message released at the beginning of the year, Her Majesty said 'As I mark 60 years as your Queen, I dedicate myself anew to your service. I hope that we will all be reminded of the power of togetherness and the convening strength of family, friendship and good neighbourliness.'

It is a remarkable statement at a time of cynicism and short termism. I was especially struck by the words 'convening strength'. Daily experience often seems to suggest that we are on the way to what Jeremy Bentham described as a 'society of strangers'. Perhaps that is why we invoke the concept of the 'community' so

frequently because we are aware of its fragility and the truth that in some parts of the country, fragmentation has gone so far that community is hard to find. But over the past 60 years, the monarchy has proved over and over again its 'convening strength' and a capacity to hallmark and foster the development of a community of communities which can give colour and encouragement to our individual lives.

Monarchy is ancient but also fresh. At a time of considerable cynicism about politics, the Queen embodies themes in our common life together which are more fundamental than this or that new idea or policy; I mean the themes of birth and death, love and loss. To place such a person at the heart of our life as a nation is to honour humanity above all things and above all divisive ideologies.

Christian monarchy today embodies not a set of policies or the pinnacle of a hierarchical social order but a life, a fully human life, lived in the presence and calling of God who dignifies all humanity.

Monarchy is an ancient idea with a fresh purpose and the same is true for the idea of the Jubilee. Jubilees whether Diamond or otherwise, are much older than 1897 or Queen Victoria, or even Britain itself. The idea of the Jubilee goes back at least 3,000 years to a small nation at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea whose life and history have shaped our own national story more than most people can imagine. Now 'all our pomp of yesterday is one with Nineveh and Tyre', it is time to re-visit the original inspiration.

### Sounding the Jubilee

It was a sound you could expect to hear once a lifetime. And when you heard it, you would never forget it, because it changed everything.

*It was a sound you could expect to hear once a lifetime. And when you heard it, you would never forget it, because it changed everything.*



*HM The Queen has called for a reminder of 'the convening strength' of good neighbourliness.*

The Jubilee is, and always has been, a moment of celebration, a shout of joy, relief, hope and carnival. But the word itself has a very specific meaning.

Jubilee comes from the ancient Hebrew word 'jobel', which itself refers to the ram's horn. The ram's horn was the closest the ancient world had to a megaphone, and when blown from one city to another, the sound could resound across the country in a matter of hours. It was the communication network of its day and when it sounded the news was important.

But what did the sound actually mean?

To understand that we need to look at the background in a bit more detail.

The people of Israel had once been enslaved in a foreign country. Brutally exploited – worked to bone and then casually disposed of once exhausted – they were the casualties of an ancient world in which life was cheap and power was supreme.

Nobody challenged the emperors and pharaohs of the world, except other emperors and pharaohs in the wars that rippled across the Middle East. Nobody dared to, and certainly nobody as lowly as mere slaves.

Yet, that is what the people of Israel had done. Inspired by their God, they had gone to the supreme commander of Egypt to demand their freedom. The result was predictable but just as their God would not give up on them, so they would not give up in their quest for liberty and for dignity.

The tussle was long and messy but eventually the Israelite slaves escaped, accompanied with a 'mixed multitude' of other labourers, slaves, foreigners, and victims of economic and political exploitation. The people were free.

But with freedom came responsibility.

When the Israelites finally found themselves in their promised land, the same God who had delivered them from slavery and abuse had some harsh words for them. They were not to forget where they came from. They were not to forget what they had once suffered. And they were not to repeat the wickedness from which they been liberated.

This was more than just a general exhortation to be good to one another. Their national laws were specific and demanding.

They were not to show favouritism to someone just because they were rich. They were to judge the rich and the poor alike, fairly.

They were not to allow their rulers to grow fat on taxes, taking the people's property just because they could.

They were not to mistreat the foreigners who came to live among them, just because they were stranger or more vulnerable than other people.

They were not to exploit labourers and hired workers, taking advantage of their poverty or weakness.

They were not to take advantage of the fatherless or the widow, those people who had no one to look after them.

They were not to sell one another into slavery, no matter how poor they became.

They were not to stand idly by while their fellow countrymen lived in poverty and destitution.

Instead, their communal life was to be very different indeed.

They were commanded to love the foreigner as themselves, to redeem the slaves, to feed the hungry, to clothe the threadbare, to protect the vulnerable, to challenge corruption, to maintain the rule of law, and to assist the poor.

You too had once been poor, God told them. You too had once been slaves. You had been hated foreigners. You had been bought and sold. Don't perpetuate those injustices on one another.

These people were to be a shining light to those around them. Other nations would hear their way of life and understand that this was the way of freedom, this was the way of justice, this was the way of life.

All this was a tall order for a group of escaped slaves. Human nature being what it is, the temptation to amass wealth and exploit the poor was always a strong one, not least if you and your ancestors had lived in economic insecurity for years.

How were they supposed to respond? This was where the Jubilee fitted in.

### A bright idea: the reset button

The Jubilee dominates one chapter in the Book of Leviticus in the Old Testament of the Bible and is hard to find elsewhere. But that one chapter lays out an idea so brilliant, so inspiring, so revolutionary that it underpinned the whole nation's attempt to build a just society.

The idea was this.

Firstly, people did not own the land. God did. This may sound like an irrelevant, theological nicety. But it was crucially important. For if the land, like all creation, belonged to God, that meant that his people – indeed any people – were answerable to him for how they treated it. As he tells them, you are my 'tenants', holding the

*The idea of Jubilee is outlined in Leviticus 25*

land in trust for future generations who would also use it. As Margaret Thatcher once put it, 'No generation has a freehold on this earth. All we have is a life tenancy — with a full repairing lease... we are its guardians and trustees for generations to come.' Concern for future generations and the need to look after the natural environment that we all share and which sustains us all was the foundation stone of a just society.

*Concern for future generations and the need to look after the natural environment ... was the foundation stone of a just society.*

Second, just as there was a deep concern for the welfare of future generations, so there was for those still living. Accordingly, the land was to be distributed equitably. As they entered into their new homeland, the Israelites divided it up among the people. All the people; every tribe, every clan, every family had some claim to the land, some stake in society. And, crucially, no one had a claim that was significantly greater than anyone else. No one could dominate his countryman. Justice meant fairness, and equal share, an equal stake in the common life.

Third, equality did not preclude freedom, in particular freedom to trade. Ancient Israel was no communist state in which everyone was nominally equal because the state owned everything. On the contrary, people were free to buy and sell goods, produce and even land as they wished. But — and here there was the crucial difference — the ancestral claim on certain lands was not forgotten in the bustle of the market place. People could buy and sell their land but one day that land would revert back to its rightful owners. When they sold land, they were, in effect, selling leaseholds, the right to use land for a certain number of years, until a day came when people went back to their homeland, claimed their birthright, and all debts were cancelled.

That day was the Jubilee.

Twice every century, the nation was required to stop, to draw breath, and to press the reset button. It was a time when land was restored and every Israelite was included in it. Jubilee was about practical restitution and economic justice – inclusion and cohesion.

This was the moment when everyone paused and looked around them, and asked the fateful question.

How are we doing?

Are we maintaining justice? Are we looking after the weak and the vulnerable? Are we simply turning our backs on the poor? Are we thinking about future generations, or just ourselves?

No one, no matter who they were, was to be excluded permanently from the nation's life. Nobody should be sold into permanent poverty. No child should lose his birthright. No family should forgo their ancient land rights.

'Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants,' the book of Leviticus says. 'It shall be a Jubilee for you.'

This was the year when people were to return to their family and their land.

This was the year when debts were to be cancelled.

This was the year when the poor were to be rescued.

This was the year when inequality was to be tackled.

This was the year when the good of future generations was protected.

This was the year when even the land itself was to be rested from the ceaseless activity that otherwise threatened to overwhelm it.

This was the year of celebration, of restoration, of inclusion, of hope. This was the Jubilee Year.

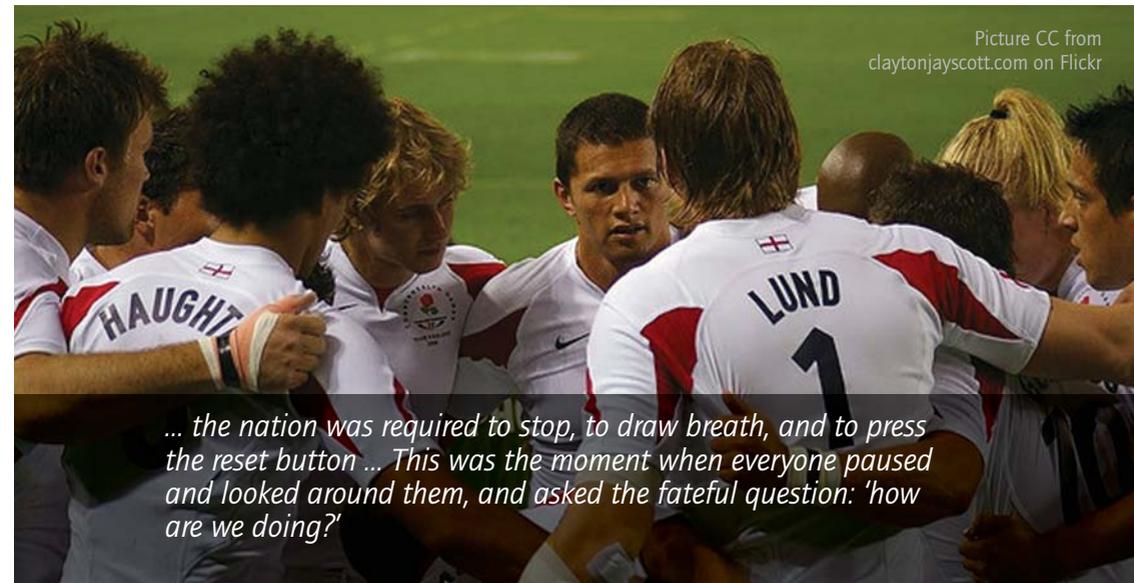
## Jesus and the Jubilee

The Jubilee was a very big ask and it is not clear whether the people ever fully instituted it. One can easily imagine the proximity of Jubilee casting a shadow of uncertainty over economic activity as the time of restitution and debt cancellation approached. Records of the implementation of the Jubilee concept in later Israelite life are scant.

It was certainly not forgotten though and the memory of Jubilee was a stimulus to aligning the life of the nation with the demands of justice and social cohesion at moments of crisis. Centuries after the time pictured in Leviticus, when the nation was once again at a low point, once again held in captivity by another empire, once again alienated from their homes and from their freedom, a prophet went back to the Jubilee as a way of raising the nation's hopes.

His was a powerful message, so powerful indeed that further centuries on, when Jesus Christ left his life in Nazareth and started to travel the land preaching about the Kingdom of God, this was the image he used to announce his message.

'The Spirit of the Lord is on me,' he proclaimed, 'because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me



Picture CC from claytonjayscott.com on Flickr

*... the nation was required to stop, to draw breath, and to press the reset button ... This was the moment when everyone paused and looked around them, and asked the fateful question: 'how are we doing?'*

to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

'The year of the Lord's favour': that was the Jubilee, as everyone who sat listening to him would have understood.

Once again, the people were under foreign occupation. This time it was yet another, different imperial superpower, but the resentment, the feeling of oppression, of not being masters of their own destiny was the same.

In this context, Jesus stood up, in front of his fellow countrymen and announced that the Jubilee was coming.

Debts would be cancelled, the sick healed, the prisoners set free, the oppressed liberated, the Jubilee sounded out across the land.

### Jubilee and Jubilos

This, then, was the origin of the Jubilee: a celebration but a celebration of freedom and of justice, of fairness for those who lived now and care for those who were to come.

That idea was never forgotten although through the course of Christian history, it did get somewhat obscured.

Early on in Christian history the Hebrew word 'jobel', referring to the ram's horn that was blown to mark Israel's 'Jubilee', was confused with the Latin word 'jubilo' meaning 'I rejoice'. The two ideas were similar but subtly different, and they became conflated.

Jubilees as 'public celebrations' were held in the Middle Ages. The papacy instituted one such celebration in 1300, a Jubilee to be held periodically - originally every 100 then every 50 years - at which time forgiveness of sins would be granted. That was a

*This, then, was the origin of the Jubilee: a celebration but a celebration of freedom and of justice.*

moment of relief and celebration but it was still different from the Jubilee of the Old Testament.

The political world did a similar thing. Jubilees were held on behalf of a particularly long-lived king. Both Henry III and Edward III reached 50 years on the throne, in 1265 and 1377 respectively, and held Jubilee celebrations accordingly.

Many years later, the British picked up the idea again when King George III made it to 50 years on the throne in 1809. This was not an easy time for Britain. War with revolutionary France, industrial transformation and resulting economic discontent and distress, an unpredictable monarch and whispers of turmoil at home made it a perilous moment in the nation's history.

Not surprisingly, this Jubilee gestured towards some of the original Jubilee ideas. There was an amnesty for those naval and military deserters who were now willing to rejoin their ship or regiment. Extra rations were issued to the forces. Prisoners of war were freed and returned home. Some debtors were released from prison with public subscriptions paying their creditors. Public celebrations were held, such as the one in Brighton where a local dignitary paid for 2,000 of the town's poor to dine out, waited on by a number of leading figures.

The intention was to celebrate the king's 50 years on the throne - but also to distract public attention from an expensive and exhausting war. This was Jubilee as the people of Israel has understood it, but with some of the more radical social implications toned down.

When, at the end of the century, Queen Victoria came to celebrate her Golden and Diamond Jubilees, the nation was richer and more confident, the world's leading superpower. Accordingly, the celebrations were indeed celebrations, magnificent and selfconfident affairs of national pride and joy in which special Jubilee hymns celebrated all that was glorious about being British:

*God bless the Queen, from shore to shore  
Deep calls to deep, and sea to sea*

*To lift a loud, exultant roar,  
A shout of Jubilee*

The original focus of the Jubilee was overshadowed but it was never entirely forgotten. The idea of justice and liberty, announcing freedom and the cancellation of debts continued to be associated with the Jubilee in the writings of Christian radicals. The seventeenth century pamphlets of the Levellers and Diggers called for a fairer England made explicit reference to the Jubilee texts. Two hundred years later, Christian reformers of a very different era quoted Leviticus, wrote Jubilee hymns and preached Jubilee sermons calling for a fairer, freer society.

It was not just self-proclaimed radicals who found inspiration in the idea of Jubilee. On 16 May 1998, around 70,000 campaigners formed a human chain around Birmingham city centre where the G8 leaders were meeting. The leaders themselves had been moved to a 'safer' location but the global media attention forced their hand and Tony Blair left the conference early to meet with the Jubilee leaders. Subsequently he, his chancellor and a number of other world leaders pledged their support to the Jubilee campaign.

Although there remains a very long way to go, it is undoubtedly the case that 'third world debt' was then established as, and remains, a major political issue. As the respected journalist and commentator Will Hutton remarked at the time, 'it is no longer Morris, Keynes and Beveridge who inspire and change the world – it's Leviticus'.



*The Jubilee debt campaign put third world debt on the table as a major political issue*

Picture CC from Paul Miller on Flickr

## Today's Jubilee

The 2012 Jubilee offers us an opportunity to pause and reflect not only on an extraordinary reign but also on what the Jubilee could mean to us as a nation.

Public opinion concerning the Queen herself is not in doubt. Her Majesty enjoys widespread and profound popularity across the British people, and beyond. Not only is she quite simply the most famous public figure on earth but she is also the most respected.

We have changed profoundly as a country in the 60 years of the Queen's reign. We have bade farewell to Empire abroad and moved into a new multicultural reality at home. The demise of the old world and the arrival of the new has involved sometimes painful adjustments. The quiet dignity of the Queen and the way in which she and her family have reached out to include newly-established British communities has provided a focus for continuing but expanding national self-respect and so has assisted the peaceful transformation of our national identity.

Our constitution may look ancient but it is in fact very modern. It is common to divinise power and many republics have heads of state who combine real political power with the aura which comes from representing the whole nation. We only have to look across the Channel to observe this alternative model.

In the United Kingdom it is different. In our head of state, we honour humanity with some very definite characteristics of the kind which bind a community together. Our sovereign was called 60 years ago in tragic circumstances to very great responsibilities. The bond between King George VI and his daughter was very close but in the words of Martin Charteris who was with the Queen in Kenya when she received the news, 'she seized her destiny with both hands.' The monarch embodies a vocational

*The 2012 Jubilee offers us an opportunity to pause and reflect ... on what the Jubilee could mean to us as a nation.*

approach to life, lived, not as a self-promoter with the hedonistic values of celebrity culture, but as a servant of God whose role is to offer 'convening strength' to the whole community.

That community embraces our memories and the values for which previous generations have fought and died and these memories and values unite the living and the departed. The departed and those yet to be born are also parts of our national community and this is an important aspect of the hereditary principle.

For a Christian monarch, the whole community includes people of different faiths and none. This is because a profound relationship with God can only be developed by those who have freely chosen to respond to his call. It is Christian to be tolerant not because we believe so little about God but because we believe so much in the importance of the free response to God's call which the monarch exemplifies at the Coronation service. Firmly rooted in the Christian faith as the Church of England has received and taught it, it has been possible for the Queen to reach out to other parts of the Christian Church and to followers of other great world religions.

While there is scepticism whenever those who represent Caesar in the political realm invoke God (and there is great wisdom in the consequent reticence displayed by politicians), it has been possible for the Queen with her very different role to be steadily more explicit in her Christmas broadcasts about her own lively faith in Jesus Christ which sustains her work.



*The Queen has been steadily more explicit about her own lively faith in Jesus Christ*

Andrew Dunsmore ©  
Commonwealth Secretariat

In her 2010 message, which focused on the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible and also on the importance of sport in our national life, she ended by saying that 'from the Scriptures in the Bible which bears his (King James') name, we know that nothing is more satisfying than the feeling of belonging to a group who are dedicated to helping each other: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them".'

This was a clear message of how seriously the Queen takes the Bible and her Christian faith, one that was made clearer still in her broadcast the following Christmas in which she told the Commonwealth that 'although we (humans) are capable of great acts of kindness, history teaches us that we sometimes need saving from ourselves – from our recklessness or our greed.' She went on to explain where she believed that salvation came from:

'God sent into the world a unique person – neither a philosopher nor a general, important though they are, but a Saviour, with the power to forgive. Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian faith. It can heal broken families, it can restore friendships and it can reconcile divided communities. It is in forgiveness that we feel the power of God's love.'

### Looking back

This recognition that it is through forgiveness that we feel the power of God's love is a key message to take into the Jubilee year. The original focus of the Jubilee was, as we have seen, on the cancellation – the forgiveness – of debts. That radical act of national forgiveness, in which debtors were forgiven, slaves freed, the poor lifted up, the homeless homed, was at the heart of Israel's life, the time when they felt the power of God's love, God's grace.

The economic strategies appropriate to an Iron Age agrarian society cannot simply be translated into today's circumstances where credit has a vital role in lifting millions out of poverty but

it is still true that as we celebrate the Jubilee of our justly popular monarch, we have an opportunity to ask some wider questions in the spirit of Jubilee, to pause, look back and ask where we are as a nation, and where we are going.

The Britain of today is enormously different from that of 1952 when the Queen acceded to the throne, let alone from the Britain of the last Diamond Jubilee in 1897. And in so many ways it is a better place to live.

A man born 60 years ago could expect to live to around 65, a woman to nearly 70. Infant mortality stood at nearly 30 per 1,000 live births. Very few people would reach 100. Many thousands of people still died from infectious and parasitic diseases.

By contrast, a boy born today can expect to live to his late 70s and a girl to over 80. Infant mortality has fallen to below 0.5%. Around one-third of babies born in 2012 in the United Kingdom are expected to survive to celebrate their 100th birthday. This is real and hopeful progress, much of it due to the extraordinary developments in science and medicine that have revolutionised our life.

Over the same time, we have become very much wealthier. GDP per capita has increased three-fold since World War II. Similarly, most Britons today live in a material paradise inconceivable in 1952, with central heating, washing machines, cars and multiple televisions becoming the norm when once they were the exception, accompanied by a vast range of labour saving and entertainment devices that were not even imaginable 60 years ago.



*Britain has seen huge change – but this Jubilee year is still an opportunity to ask big questions about our society*

Picture CC from brizzle born and bread on Flickr    Picture CC from Geoff\_B on Flickr

Nor have the benefits been restricted to the UK. Many countries in the Commonwealth have experienced similar improvement in life expectancy, child mortality, health, sanitation, shelter, nutrition and literacy. That recognised, one of the more sobering trends of the last 60 years has been that the material progress made in some countries, mostly in the West, has far exceeded that in other countries.

And it is this growing global inequality that points us towards some of the more worrying trends since the Queen came to the throne. Because if inequality has grown across the world over the last few generations, it has also grown in Britain so that we are a more unequal society now than at almost any time since the post-war period.

This is alarming but the story doesn't end with growing material inequality. Indeed that inequality points towards an altogether bigger and more alarming trend. Britain is indeed a better place today materially than ever before, but that material progress has been at the expense of our relationships with one another, our communal life.

Within families, within communities, within society as a whole, our relationships are more strained, more fragile, more broken than we care to recognise.

The rate of homicides has doubled over the last half century. The number of indictable offences per 1,000 population has risen from around 10 per 1,000 in 1952 to nearer 100 per 1,000 today. The prison population has risen from around 20,000 in early 1950s to nearly 90,000 today. And all this is in spite of the fact that the number of police has increased from 70,000 then to near 150,000 today.

Literally millions of children grow up without knowing a stable, loving, secure family life – and that is not to count the hundreds of thousands more who don't even make it out of the womb each year. Promiscuity, separation and divorce have reached epidemic proportions in our society. Perhaps, then, we shouldn't be surprised

that depression and the prescription of anti-depressants has reached a similarly epidemic level.

Things have got so bad that even economists are beginning to notice. As the economist Richard Layard noted in a series of lectures that were delivered as long ago as the Queen's Golden Jubilee, 'People in the West have got no happier in the last 50 years. They have become much richer, they work much less, they have longer holidays, they travel more, they live longer and they are healthier. But they are no happier.'

*People in the West  
have got no happier  
in the last 50 years.  
They have become  
much richer ... but  
they are no happier.*

Worse still, one of the alleged cures for some of these ailments has turned out to be part of their cause. For over a generation now we have come to believe that we could grow our way out of our problems. The free market and economic growth would solve our ills, the only significant difference between those on the right and those on the left being a disagreement about how much money the state should cream off in taxes to plug the holes left by the market.

The end of poverty was predicted. The end of boom and bust was proclaimed.

The End of History was announced. But it never quite turned out like that.

To top all this, in the last few years the Western world imploded in the most spectacular financial crash in 80 years, and one that has now lasted longer than the Wall Street Crash. Public spending programmes, debt-fuelled before the disaster of 2008-09, became crippling and unsustainable after it. Millions across Europe and America lost jobs, homes, security and hope. Millions have not yet got them back.

The young have suffered particularly harshly, with youth unemployment in Britain standing at around 20%, a figure that is depressingly high and not made better by the fact that it stands even higher in many European countries.

It is a recognised fact that the one positive impact of economic downturns is to slow down the rate of environmental damage, as lower rates of economic activity usually translate into lower levels of pollution. That, however, will be poor comfort to the unemployed and is, in any case, largely irrelevant as during the boom years, our levels of carbon emission were such that we have committed our planet – and future generations – to many decades of climate change which will inevitably have a disproportionately severe impact on the communities in the world least able to insulate themselves against the effects.

But Jubilee has never been about immobilising gloom but instead focuses on hope and on what we can do to reset the situation. The Jubilee is a moment to reflect and to evaluate. Doing so we realise that, according to the criteria the Jubilee offers – How fair is our society? How much poverty and inequality is there? How much consideration are we giving to the well-being of future generations? What care are we taking of our shared environment? – these are questions we should not shirk.



*Jubilee has never been about immobilising  
gloom but instead focuses on hope ...*

Picture CC from Josh  
Pesavento (broma) on Flickr

The Jubilee is indeed a time of celebration and this year we are entirely right to celebrate 60 years of a truly remarkable monarch. Pessimism is the indulgence of rich people and there is much to celebrate. But it is also a time to pause, pay attention to the demands of freedom, dignity and justice that the Bible makes of us, to repent, and to move forward with renewed hope and commitment.

### Thinking forward

David Cameron is the Queen's twelfth Prime Minister. Her first was Winston Churchill, in his second period in No. 10.

For all the British rightly celebrate Churchill and his unique achievements as a wartime leader, it is clear that his Britain has gone. Britain in 2012 cannot and should not hope to be the Britain of 1952. We cannot return to the old normal.

Instead we must use this opportunity to reflect on our progress and our failings as we create fresh narrative to help us as a nation to identify and inhabit a New Normal in which we can slough off post-imperial self-loathing and incorporate the Jubilee themes of freedom, dignity and justice.

What does this mean in reality?

Firstly, it means taking the long view and reconnecting with our history. Anyone with a sense of history and no sense of destiny is no doubt a very tedious fellow. Anyone with a sense of destiny and no sense of history is certainly a very dangerous fellow.

The Jubilee as outlined in the Old Testament was about living for the long-term. As a celebration it would take place once a lifetime, twice at most. It was intended to recall the people to the fundamental principles upon which the nation had been built and as a result to rebalance the short-term inequalities that arise in every society, to ensure that children did not lose their birthright,

*We must use this opportunity to ... create a fresh narrative ... and inhabit a New Normal.*

to ensure that the land on which everyone depended would not be exhausted by ceaseless activity.

Few messages could be more germane to Britain today, where ever-faster travel and communication might have extended our geographical horizons but has painfully shortened our temporal ones.

In 1930 the great economist John Maynard Keynes wrote an essay entitled *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren* in which he said, 'for the first time since his creation, man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem – how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well.' The dream persisted into the 1960s when people imagined a coming leisure-time society in which the pace of life would slow and no one would need to work more than three days a week.

It was to remain a dream. Today, society seems to be divided into those who can't find work and those whose work exhausts them. We have less time for one another and, crucially, less time to plan for the future. Short-term pressures – from the pressures of 'juggling' work and family life to the need to report business profits on a quarterly basis – dominate our lives.

Worse still, we have used the earth's natural resources as if they were infinitely extendable, ameliorating our concerns with the belief that human ingenuity would find a way out of any imminent problems, or simply ignoring the future altogether.



*We have used the earth's natural resources as if they were infinitely extendable ...*

Picture CC from Satoru Kikuchi on Flickr

The Jubilee reminds us to take the long view and to account not only for our grandchildren in our calculations but also for the environment which we share with them and those unborn.

Second, it means living within our means. The Jubilee was all about cancelling debts but that did not mean it encouraged people to run up debts. The Jubilee may have been the only time when the nation as a whole was encouraged to go back to its ancestral lands but it was not the only time debts were cancelled.

Every seven years – a Sabbath of years – the Israelites were told they should cancel debts. 'Every creditor shall cancel any loan they have made to a fellow Israelite. They shall not require payment from anyone among their own people, because the Lord's time for cancelling debts has been proclaimed.'

Credit is essential to any free society and modern economy. But in ancient Israel such lending was to be kept short. And interest free: the Israelites were repeatedly told 'If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest.' In other words, debt is fine – as long as it is limited, short-term and morally-sensitive.

The debt we have racked up in Britain has most certainly not been limited, short-term or morally-sensitive. The UK national debt now stands at over £1,000 billion, or around £16,000 for every man, woman and child in Britain. As a proportion it hasn't been so high since the immediate post-war period. To pay the annual interest of around £40 billion alone it will cost every household nearly £2,000 a year. Estimates differ on how long – if ever – we will take to repay this debt, not least because that timeframe depends on government policy, but it is clear that we are talking here about considerably more than seven years, and very possibly decades.

Nor is the debt problem limited to the nation as a whole. Personal debt is even greater than national debt, standing at around £1,500 billion in total. Much of this is mortgage debt but around £200 billion is consumer, or credit card, debt. That means that average household debt in the UK excluding mortgages is around £8,000 (including mortgages it is more like £50,000).

And it is increasing. The Office for Budget Responsibility predicts that total household debt will reach over £2,000 billion by 2017. It is no wonder that in our country every single day hundreds of people are declared insolvent or bankrupt; hundreds of mortgage and landlord possession orders are made; hundreds of consumer County Court Judgements are issued; hundreds of debt enquiries are made to Citizens Advice Bureaux. And no wonder loan sharks – or payday loan firms as they prefer to be called – are doing so well, some charging an eye-watering 3,000% interest.

This is a crippling debt economy and it cannot go on. A Jubilee reflection tells us that the new normal must see us living within our means and not borrowing from tomorrow in the way we have been doing in the past.

Third, it means being honest about how we can solve our problems. For too long political debate has become polarised between the promise of the market and the promise of the state, both beset by gross over claim.

On the one hand, economic libertarians have placed an almost magical trust in the market, seeing in it the solution to all our problems.

On the other, the left has distrusted the market to varying degrees and argued that only the state can deliver justice; hence the growth in number, detail and complexity of laws and regulations over the last 20 years.

But whereas both market and state undoubtedly have vital roles to play in public life, the one-or-the-other rhetoric has been deeply unhelpful.

The Israelites recognised the importance of both political power and free trade, but they also recognised the importance of limiting both. Political power was intended to be decentralised, spread out

*A Jubilee reflection tells us that the new normal must see us living within our means and not borrowing from tomorrow.*

across the nations in tribes and clans. When they eventually chose a king it was with grave warning that he would almost certainly abuse his power. Similarly, while the market was permitted it was also limited by such things as the ban on interest and, of course, the Jubilee.

From this basis, Christianity developed a three-way division of society, including a group that was neither the state nor the market but which had an active responsibility for the welfare of the people, as individuals and in communities.

From the earliest days, English society was divided into three groups: those who provided people with sustenance, those who defended the nation, and those who prayed and cared for souls.

In time this three-part division between soldiers, labourers, and 'beadsmen' would become the three-part division that marked out British, indeed Western, society. There was the market in which goods were traded. There was the government whose primary function was to protect the nation and to keep public order. But there was also, crucially, civil society, that section of society in which men and women associated together freely, motivated not by profit or by law, but by the desire to pursue one another's good. It was always an uneasy balance between these sectors, the boundaries between being unclear and shifting. But it was a critical balance, nonetheless, marking out the contours of a free society.

That balance was disturbed in the twentieth century. First those on the left claimed that the state could do all that was necessary and usurped all the other functions. Then, later in the century, partly in

reaction to the state's extravagant claims and consequent failures, those on the right claimed that the market could do all that was necessary and the West shifted, in the words of the Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel, from 'having a market economy to being a market society'.

Yet, no matter where they come from, such attempts for one sector to dominate society end up as disasters.

A Jubilee reflection demands of us that we rebalance the scales. Politicians need to the courage to admit that the solution to the problems we face are bigger than the capacities of the state alone, or the market alone, or even the state and the market together. We need the courage to admit that responsibility and blame cannot be entirely shifted to economists or to politicians. Only we have the necessary capacity.

But it will need courage to rebalance the scales. Government needs to do less, and do more to enable all the various bodies within civil society to do what they do best, rather than preventing them by tying them up in rules and regulations. But at the same time it is also necessary to rein in the market which has ruled supreme over the last 30 years. Whether that is through legislation guaranteeing people time off or through changed personal lives in which we rein in our consumption in favour of other activities, what is clear is that the future needs to be different from the past.

*Politicians need to the courage to admit that the solution to the problems we face are bigger than ... the state alone, or the market alone.*



*For too long political debate has become polarised between the promise of the market and the promise of the state ...*

## Conclusion

The argument weaving its way through this pamphlet has been that we need to move forward to a new and sustainable normal. This is an urgent priority. Contemporary society lacks any credible narrative to release energies for the profound changes which are necessary and to give us a direction of travel. We need to go further than a bare recital of economic indicators and embrace a common vision that offers us hope.

I do not pretend that there are obvious detailed policies for getting us from where we are to where we want to be. In particular there is nothing in ordination that gives bishops and clergy a special insight into how to solve the crisis of the eurozone, reduce the deficit or tackle social breakdown.

That said, however, Christians, and more widely members of those communities which in various ways look back to Abraham as their ancestor in faith, do have Scriptures and a tradition spanning thousands of years which offer a framework in which to consider the thorniest issues of our time and how to live well.

There is nothing inevitable about where we are now. The present situation is the result of choices which could have been different.

In the period of the first Elizabeth, the availability of the Scriptures in English enabled people to develop a powerful narrative about their national life and identity. Now in a country enriched by new arrivals with their own stories and traditions, the Bible offers a big story, cosmic in scope which has room for everyone to inhabit. I am not advocating a Bible-says-it-all culture. We tried that disastrous experiment in the time of Protector Cromwell. The Bible is abused if it is ransacked for detailed policy prescriptions for all the economic and social challenges of our day. But the Bible does put us in touch with the drama of the whole human race, a drama whose author is God.



*... we need to move forward to a new and sustainable normal. This is an urgent priority.*

It gives us moral norms and a direction of travel together with a call in this Jubilee year to press the reset button.

No one needs this reset more than the young adults of our country. The extent of youth unemployment is appalling. The waste of human talent is unsustainable morally and economically. We should not simply look to government for a solution but look to our communities for role models and mentors to encourage, challenge and enthuse those who are in danger of losing hope.

The Scriptures sketch a vision for our life together on this planet that is bigger than the state or the market or our nation. There is no return to Churchill's Britain or to the seemingly attractive but ultimately oppressive social experiments of the 1960s. We need a fresh narrative that appreciates the real virtues communicated by our history but which transcends our recent past. The Bible offers a hopeful vision of a society where everyone is included, justice is done and all have the opportunity to fulfil their potential and to be generous. In this year of Jubilee, revisiting the original inspiration of the idea gives us resources to deploy as we seek to establish a new normal. If we succeed in this task not only our children but our children's will be the better for it.