

Judaeo-Christian Scripture may begin with a story about the loss of Paradise but it also promises a new heaven and earth as the end of history and many, if not most, of us harbour deep within us a dream of this promise. Throughout history this dream has inspired and continues to inspire people to leave home in search of a better life elsewhere. In particular it has drawn thousands, millions even, to found new societies like ours, crossing the world to do so. The Statue of Liberty in New York harbour and its inscription sums up the dream with its promise of a new life for all those who are poor, oppressed or in need. If you think about it, it also underlies the search for a Sustainable Future which increasingly concerns us in this State and indeed throughout the world.

There is a problem, however. Those who call the tune in political and economic affairs and in the media tend to focus on what is immediate and 'practical', on what will or will not contribute to economic growth, though, to be fair, a growing number of business people are beginning to realise the importance of rethinking many things we now take for granted. To them the dream of a better world is rather like religion which they regard as 'pie in the sky', mere feelings with no basis in 'fact' which in their view has to do with the business of money-making, money-having and money-spending. What I would like to suggest, however, is that it is they who are the impractical ones, that the great need today is to renew the dream on which our kind of society is based, the dream of a better world -- something otherwise in short supply in a world full of gloom and doom.

The first point to be made is that in fact the 'practical' people in their own way also subscribe to this dream. The difference, however, lies in their definition of what a 'better' world might be. By and large they see it as one which produces more and more material goods. Technology grows more and more powerful and people have more money to spend not just on satisfying their needs but in indulging ever-increasing desires, consuming for the pleasure of consuming. This is understandable. The culture which dominates the world today, that of USA, is an immigrant culture and most immigrants leave home because they are poor or oppressed. But as Hannah Arendt (who herself fled from Hitler's Germany in the 1930s) has pointed out, they are usually drawn by a dream of abundance and endless consumption, a 'mirage in the desert of misery' in which they find themselves.

As she also pointed out, however, this dream can prove tyrannical. 'The bonds of necessity need not be of iron, they can be made of silk' and the games advertisers play make this clear. 'To each according to desire' is very different from 'to each according to need' which is the basis of a just and equitable society. It encourages us to consume more than we really need, persuading us that what is new is necessarily better than what is old and so to throw away many things that may in fact be useful, even valuable, and conditioning us to compete rather than cooperate with one another, to

see money as the main value and regard rich people as better than others , in effect implying that might equals right

In the long run , however , this is not so much a way of life as a way of death . The gap between rich and poor grows both nationally and internationally , social breakdown , violence , disease and despair increase , we exhaust the earth's resources and destroy the delicate balance of the environment . Clearly the kind of future which faces us if we continue in this way is not sustainable . We are in danger of destroying ourselves not only physically but spiritually also as greed , selfishness and suspicion undermine the very notion of community on which human civilisation depends . We are also damaging the planet on which we depend , perhaps irreparably . In his own inimitable way Michael Leunig in *The Curly Pyjama Letters* suggests therefore that we are suffering from a 'great , symphonic , invisible madness ; the accumulating , collective , interactive madness called normal life'. How to become sane , find the way to a future which is sustainable ?

Essentially we need to rethink what we see as 'normal'and valuable and redefine what we mean by 'reality'. Leunig , to quote him once again , sums up the feeling that many of us have today and which underlies much of the discussion about a sustainable future . 'I have a peculiar feeling ... that I am worn out by something I haven't yet done and the more I don't do it the more exhausted I become ... Could it be something ... I haven't realised?' The words of British astronomer Fred Hoyle may help this realisation . In 1948 as the possibilities of space exploration were beginning to open out he wrote : 'Once a photograph of the earth , taken from outside , is available -- once the sheer isolation of the earth becomes plain , a new idea , as powerful as any in history will be let loose'. This idea is the fact that all human beings , regardless of appearance , culture or gender , all the animals , birds , fishes , reptiles and insects , all the rivers , lakes and seas , the air , rocks and soil , all share the one life on one small and fragile planet suspended in infinite space . Our fate as human beings is not separate from but intimately bound up with this complex and fragile web of life .

Once we accept this fact with which the environmental crisis facing us confronts us , it becomes clear that if we are to survive we must think about our place in this scheme of things , redefine who we think we are, where we belong and what we should be doing . The crucial question to ask is then where our loyalties lie . It can no longer be a matter of merely 'looking after number one' or even of family friends and our own nation . We owe loyalty to life as a whole and what will sustain it . In this perspective the question of a sustainable future is therefore not a luxury , a mere academic exercise , as many so-called 'practical' people say , but a necessity , and a practical as well as ethical one .

To begin with , the word 'sustainable' itself is worth considering . The first definition of 'sustain' given by the Macquarie Dictionary is 'to hold or bear up from below ; bear the weight of ; be the support of , as in a structure'. A sustainable future would thus be one in which we understand that our task as human beings not to exploit the world but to play our part in caring for and supporting the fabric of life as a whole , realising that , as the poet and priest John Donne put it in the seventeenth century , none of us is an island , entire unto ourselves and self-sufficient , but that we are all part of the great continent of life .

This is a vision which is religious since all of the world's great religions remind us that 'the earth is the Lord's' , that we belong and owe obedience to the Creator -- in this country we also have the wisdom of Aboriginal culture to draw on with its deep sense of reverence for and community with all living things . But contemporary science offers a similar vision , telling us not only that our bodies involve us in the ongoing energies of creation and but that consciousness is also part of their unfolding . Becoming real therefore means becoming aware of and taking possession of our place in this whole, living and knowing , and in that act affecting the life of the cosmos of which we are part -- for good or ill .

Contemporary science also challenges the narrow materialism which dominates so much of our present culture , insisting that what is unseen is at least as important as what is seen ; 90% of the universe , according to contemporary physics , is unseen . So it is becoming clear that those who focus only on the narrow kind of economics which has to do with the business of money-making , money-having and money-spending have got it badly wrong , concentrating on only one corner of human existence and threatening life as a whole . The law of life is not exploitation and competition but cooperation , understanding the logic of life and working with rather than against it . As Shakespeare put it , there are more things in heaven and earth than our human minds can understand and that we owe obedience and respect to this ultimate reality.

This is a worldview which , as we have said , can be seen as religious because it sets our individual existence in the context of a larger and mysterious whole -- one theologian , Karl Rahner , for example , defines God as 'the silent one who is always there , and yet can always be overlooked , unheard , and , because it expresses the whole in its unity and totality can be passed over as meaningless'. But it also offers our best map of reality and , as we have also been suggesting , to be out of touch with reality is dangerous .

What does all this mean in practice ? First and foremost it means that we need to reassess our priorities and question the idea of a consumer society , that we exist to consume more and more things and to make more and more money to do so . The earth's resources are not infinite and we are squandering them at an alarming rate . We might also interrogate the notion

that money is the main , if not sole , value and remind ourselves that we do not exist to make money but to live and to rejoice in living . It is clear that an affluent society is not necessarily a happy or contented one . Similarly to live for mindless pleasure can become a kind of enslavement . Perhaps our great problem is that we have forgotten the wisdom contained , for example , in the Sermon on the Mount but also part of religious traditions in general , the wisdom which insists on the importance of living simply , knowing one's place in the scheme of things and living reverently as part of it , respecting and sharing with others , recognising that pain is part of life and calls for compassion and courage rather than denial but believing that we are made for joy and that it can be found by living simply and generously . This is the way to a sustainable future , one which will enable the peoples of this crowded and troubled planet to live together peacefully and with mutual respect , to play a positive part in the community of life Fred Hoyle about and meet the challenge of this moment of history .

To conclude . The question of a sustainable future is the key question facing humanity today . But to think about it is to remind ourselves of the importance of the dream of a better world , something we have lost sight of at the moment , preoccupied as we are with bad news . 'Practical' people have got it wrong . When we lose the ability to dream we lose the power to change the way things are , to look for the meaning beyond the meaning of commonsense . Surely what we need today is hope , 'that long-distance runner' , as Gunter Grass calls it . If we accept that the best definition of a nation is that it is an 'imagined community' then one of the most important things any government can do is to stimulate the imagination of its citizens . Thinking about a sustainable future may be one of the best ways of doing this .

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