

Rt Rev. Philip North
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Thought for the Day
July 2023

Post-industrial towns in Lancashire such as Burnley and Blackpool would normally welcome sectors of the economy that are thriving and growing.

But in recent days local leaders in both towns have been expressing concerns at one area of growth, which is care homes for children. In Blackpool for example the number of such homes has increased from 7 to 26 in just five years.

It would be nice to think that this expansion is because of the beautiful Lancashire countryside or the seaside air. But the availability of cheap property and lower labour costs are also playing a part.

There's a desperate shortage of places in care for vulnerable children and in recent years private care providers have proliferated, replacing homes runs by local councils.

The sector is now said to be worth more than £6 billion a year, but increasingly questions are being asked about how such a vital service is being run. Last year a report from the Competitions and Markets Authority described the market as dysfunctional and children's social care was generating excessive profits.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with the profit motive in itself. The Christian tradition is very positive about trade when it enhances human life. Christian social teaching honours the dignity of work. And strikingly, theologians have long drawn on the metaphor of the market place to explain the saving work of Jesus whose death purchases the sinner from captivity to death. Trade is something that can enrich and enhance human life.

But this is a trade where children are the commodity that generate profit. With so few places in children's homes in the south, many find themselves transported up to 300 miles from home. Leaving behind their families and communities, they speak of alienation and isolation. They find themselves in a very different cultural context and they must live without the precious networks of relationships that give them their identity.

It may well be that the private sector is capable of caring for the nation's most vulnerable young people. And of course there are many dedicated and loving professionals in this field who work for private companies. But when the debate about childcare gravitates to relative costs and profit margins then I think alarm bells should start to be heard.

Jesus is harsh about trade that undermines human dignity. He vigorously attacks the traders in the Temple because their work is separating the people from God. The house of prayer has been turned into a 'den of robbers' he loudly complains. We need to exercise caution when we reach that point when trade becomes life-denying rather than life-enhancing.