

Thought for the Day; August 3, 2023;

The common good concept can help us to flourish longer-term

It has been an odd few days for the news. On the one hand there has been constant coverage of the weather. Terrifying wild fires causing the evacuation of the Island of Rhodes. The hottest week in human history with temperatures in some parts of the world consistently above 40 degrees. Incessant rain in the UK wiping out the cricket. And climate scientists warning that worst case scenarios are unfolding.

But ironically, following the by-election in Uxbridge and Ruislip and the debate around the London Ultra Low Emissions Zone, the major political parties are becoming concerned that environmental policies are a vote loser. The prayer ascribed to St Augustine, 'Lord make me good, but not yet,' rather sums up our attitude to the sacrifices we will need to make if climate change is to be contained.

Some would suggest that this indicates a fundamental fault line in democracy. Politicians by necessity have to think short-term because voters generally think short-term. So how do we handle complex long-term issues where there is no immediate gain for anyone? Can democracy cope with the climate crisis?

The concept of the common good might offer some guidance, an important idea in the social teaching of most churches and a concept developed by St Thomas Aquinas. He drew a contrast between private good, which is how an individual might benefit from any situation, and common good which is how all can flourish together. He argued that it is necessary to sacrifice something of the private good for the greater good of all.

For Thomas the greatest good is participation in the life of God. But the principle of the common good is one that can be applied in all sorts of contexts. A simple example is the Tour de France which ended for the men and began for the women yesterday. Many cyclists set off knowing they don't have a chance of a podium place. Their job is to sacrifice themselves so that the star riders in their team have a better chance of winning. These riders give away their private good for the common good which is their team's victory in the race.

When the future of the planet is threatened, I think uniting around a common good which transcends partisan politics is essential. Of course that's much easier to say than do. It will be hard for those for whom sacrificing the private good cuts especially deep, such as those on a low income. It will require courageous partnerships between those who might otherwise be political enemies. But perhaps common good thinking can offer inspiration in the hard decisions we need to make if the planet is to flourish and democracy survive.

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