

That you act justly . . .

Br John Deeney

"The times they are a-changing"

We all know how another few grains of sugar added to the scales can suddenly tip the balance, yet many of us still get taken by surprise when, over a short time, the huge problems that might have seemed to be in the background suddenly take centre stage. So there have been food riots in Bangladesh, the Philippines, Haiti, Senegal, Egypt to name a few places. Other countries have governments under extreme pressure because of the soaring price of food. Closer to home we cannot help noticing the struggling housing and mortgage sectors as well as the jump in fuel prices and no doubt these have been affecting the popularity of our government

There are all sorts of reasons given for this sudden squeeze; the bad practice of some banks; the increasing use of biofuels; the increased demand for oil alongside the shrinking of oilfields; the increasing human population; the greater wealth and consumption of many countries but with the addition of new areas such as China; altered weather patterns attributable to global warming. It would be nice to think that these problems were just a blip on the progress chart of mankind. But that seems to be unlikely and we might suppose, as the words of the song continue, "It's a hard rain that's a-gonna fall."

The current problems present a huge and long-term challenge to humanity – one that will not be overcome without global cooperation. On the positive side we certainly now have the communications systems to talk to each other wherever we may be. But, as Mark Twain replied when told by an enthusiastic man that the USA was now linked from east to west and Washington could talk to Seattle, "Yes, but what will Washington **say** to Seattle." How we relate to each other across the world and what we aim to achieve together will be the crucial factor.

Meat – your doom

Part of the current food shortage concerns rice. Some countries have introduced strict limits on exports of this crop in case their own country, where it is the staple diet, should run short. One of the problems of rice is that it needs lots of water and if the rains shift from their traditional pattern the crops can suffer badly. But it is interesting to compare the amount of water used for rice growing

compared to that of beef production. The average number of litres used to produce 1 kilo of rice is 2,380. The number required to produce a kilo of beef is around 9,680. So if we were to consume less beef we could have lots more rice – or wheat or maize. It also takes around 8 kilos of grain feed to produce 1 kilo of beef and 7 litres of oil (the petroleum variety) are also required for each 1 kilo of steak. There is enough ammunition there to justify the slogan 'Vegetarianism makes sense', an interesting theme for a poster competition. But if we would find it difficult to be fully converted, there is still a great deal of sense in gradually modifying our diet so that we consume less meat and make its production a more viable option. A general move in this direction amongst the more affluent inhabitants of our planet would take some of the stress out of the food crisis, allow a little bit more for those who have least and, by all accounts, it should be healthier for us personally as well as for the planet.



Fairtrade begins

Usually we think of Fairtrade in the context of Guatemalan banana growers or Colombian coffee farmers. But a Church of England report is entitled 'Fairtrade begins at home'. It highlights the way that supermarkets and big suppliers often squeeze UK farmers so that their livelihood is put at risk. This is usually glossed over with the excuse that "We are getting the best prices for our consumers." But it is more like exploitation of their powerful buying position. Curiously, and unfairly, the farmers are often made to foot the bill for the frequent promotions of 'Two for the price of one' or 'Buy one, get one half price'. And we always thought it was our favourite supermarket being generous to us! There is a strong case for an in-depth government review of the practices of the 'shop empires'. In the meantime we might pay attention to the moral stance of our supermarkets wherever these are highlighted and shop accordingly.

After writing on the theme of food, I feel that I ought to finish with a recipe. So here is one from Haiti. Mix together mud, oil and sugar, shape into patties and grill or fry. One regular 24 year old consumer remarked: "It's salty and has butter and you don't know you're eating dirt. It makes your stomach quiet down."