

OCTOBER 2016

Dear Friends,

'All In It Together?'

At Harvest Festival services up and down the country, Christians have been meeting to give thanks for the fruits of the earth and for the work of those like the farmers who enable us to enjoy them.

But are we sharing in these blessings in a just and fair way? The answer is almost certainly 'No'. Since the recession, the gulf between rich and poor has widened. The rich have become 64% richer, the poor 57% poorer, and around 10% of the population possess almost half the nation's household assets.

There is deep sense of unease, as a number of large companies discovered at their Annual Meetings earlier this year. When the medical equipment group *Smith & Nephew* had its AGM, for example, more than 50% of investors voted against the proposed pay deals, and earlier on the same day, nearly 60% of the BP shareholders rejected the £14m pay package for their chief executive. How could such a salary possibly be justified, they asked, in a year in which the company had suffered record losses, cut thousands of jobs and frozen employees' pay?

The former chancellor, George Osborne, famously declared that 'we are all in it together', but those 'at the top' are so far removed from those 'at the bottom' that the idea of meaningful solidarity seems little more than wishful thinking. A few weeks ago, the City law firm, *Reynolds Porter Chamberlain*, published a highly critical report of *Sport Direct*. It followed revelations in the *Guardian* newspaper that the firm had been paying temporary staff at one of their warehouses less than the minimum wage and adopting a style of management which left them in constant fear of losing their job. The relationship between the bosses and the workers was plagued by ignorance, indifference and at its worse abuse. How could the founder and majority shareholder, Mike Ashley, and his work force be 'in it together', if he was ignorant of what was going on? And how could his chief executive, David Forsey, the man largely to blame for the low wages, claim any sense of solidarity, if as a 'punishment' he merely forfeited his four million pound *bonus*?!

The principle of solidarity is an important one in the Bible. Consider, for example, the laws on firstfruits and gleaning. The firstfruits laws decreed that the first sheaf of corn or the first basket of fruit from the orchard had at harvest time to be taken by the people to the Temple and presented to a priest. The purpose of this was to remind them that the whole harvest belonged to God (eg Exodus 34:26; Leviticus 23:9) and that they were simply stewards acting on his behalf.

They were not free to do as they pleased and the gleaning laws provided a useful guide as to how God wanted his stewards to behave:

“Do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and foreigner.” (Leviticus 19:9-10)

God cares for everyone and wants us all to share in the blessings of the harvest. If we are not all in it together (sharing and caring for each other), then we should be!

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