

# *Love & Politics: The Revolutionary Frederic Ozanam*



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## *Ozanam Lecture 2007*

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The lecture is held annually  
in honour of the  
St Vincent de Paul Society's founder,

*Blessed Frederic Ozanam*  
**1813-1853**



**St Vincent de Paul Society**  
*good works*



# Love & Politics: The Revolutionary Frederic Ozanam

Dr John Honner

Director, Edmund Rice Community Services

## Introduction

In 1842, a few months after the foundation stone of this church of St Francis in Melbourne was laid, Frederic Ozanam was 29 years old. He was in the prime of his life. The St Vincent de Paul Society had been up and running for nearly 10 years. He had recently married Amelie Soulacroix, the love of his life. He had been awarded the highest honour of the University of Paris, the *agrégation de lettres*, and was about to be appointed professor of Foreign Literature. He hoped to complete a long-planned study of the history of European civilisation, but history itself would soon intervene. The future that meets us is rarely the future we plan for.

1846 was not a good year anywhere in Europe. Crops failed. Financial crises and depression followed. In France the peasants rebelled unsuccessfully, but then the Paris revolution of February 1848 produced the chaotic government of the Second Republic. Frederic Ozanam suddenly found himself no longer a professor, but a journalist, a political agitator, and a supporter of the revolution.

What kind of a revolutionary was he? For the past 12 months, thanks to the encouragement of the St Vincent de Paul Society here in Victoria, I have been writing a small book on Frederic which has the working title, *Love & Politics: The Revolutionary Frederic Ozanam*.

In this lecture tonight I want to share with you some of what I have learnt. I shall focus on three key words: 'love', 'politics', and 'revolutionary'. I shall leave it to Dr John Falzon, in his response, to draw out some of the implications for our own times. In short, politics should strive at least to deliver justice, but love is greater than justice: when love engages politics, revolutions may follow.

## 1. Love

Let us begin with love. Love meant everything to Frederic. In 1834, when he was 21, Frederic wrote to his cousin and friend Ernest Falconnet about his views of political systems and his priorities for government: 'If you want a formula', Frederic wrote, 'here it is':

*I believe in authority as a means, in liberty as a means, and in love as the end (Dirvin, p.46).*

This philosophical distinction between means and end reminds us that, for Frederic, love had a philosophical dimension, as well as a religious dimension and a personal dimension. Let us look at each of these in turn.

First, in the western philosophical tradition, love was connected with the true, the good and the beautiful. These were seen as features of pure being, and therefore as both features of the divine and guides for moral action. Love, in other words, was directly



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Frederic Ozanam

connected with moral action and therefore, by implication, with political action.

Frederic’s great scholarly ambition was to write a masterpiece to be called *A History of Christian Civilisation from the Time of the Barbarian*. His aim was to show how Christian love and Christian philosophy produced good politics: as he put it:

*on the ruins of the Roman Empire ... Christianity constructed a new Society capable of knowing truth, doing good and realising the beautiful.*  
(Baurard, pp.330-331)

Secondly, love was important for the young Frederic, not just as a philosophical ideal, but also as a part of human life and part of religion. As a 19 year old he lamented the separation of love and truth that he encountered when he arrived in Paris: ‘there is much more knowledge, and much less love’, he wrote, ‘illumination of mind and dryness of heart’ (Dirvin, p.107).

Frederic found God’s love in the self-sacrificing love of Jesus Christ, and he found Christ’s self-sacrificing love in loving the poor. As he put it, the poor

*...are for us the sacred images of that God whom we do not see, and not knowing how to love him in another way, we love him through you’.* (Dirvin, p.96)

It was not for nothing then, that the original name of the St Vincent de Paul Society was the ‘conference of charity’ or ‘the conference of love’.

As well as the philosophical and religious dimensions of love, however, there is the personal dimension. We can tell from Frederic’s correspondence how many friendships he sustained and how warm he was in his communication. Nothing, however, compares with his correspondence with his wife. In 1843, for example, he concluded a long letter to Amelie:

*Come, then, my well-beloved, my dove, my angel, come into my arms, against my heart, come bringing me yours so pure and generous: come and God bless you that after two years we still love each other a thousand times more than on the first day!... How sad and painful it is for me not to be at your side, to support your head in sleep.... Accept my well-beloved, the tenderest and purest kiss that the love of a husband content with your tenderness can give.*  
(Dirvin, p.358)

This letter runs to over four printed pages. It was written on 13 October 1843. He had already written letters to Amelie on 8, 10 and 11 of October. Enough said: Frederic was primarily a man of love.

What is more to our purpose, however, is that Frederic saw love as having political force. In the social turmoil of his day, in the struggles between haves and have nots, Frederic saw the force of love as being of utmost importance if chaos and brutality were to be avoided:

*The confrontation between these two self-interests, the poor who have the force of numbers and the rich that of silver, will be terrible if charity does not interpose, become a mediator, if Christians do not dominate with all the force of love.* (Dirvin, p.88)

For Frederic, the hallmark of love was self-sacrifice. His ideal form of government was shown in ‘the sacrifice of the few for the good of all, the Christian Republic of the primitive Church of Jerusalem’ (Dirvin, p.47). Frederic argued that this social spirit, ‘the sacrifice of the few for the good of all’ should have priority in politics (Dirvin, p.46). One indication of his radicalism is the criticism he provoked from some conservative Catholics: one anonymous writer accused Frederic of being a disloyal Catholic and setting up a ‘party of love’, made up of ‘rabid sheep’ (Baurard, p.308). We followers of Frederic might be proud today to be called members of the ‘party of love’, if not to be ‘rabid sheep’.

In concluding this section on love, we see that Frederic was a man of love in his personal life, his faith, and his scholarship. Love, in the end, came down to a mystical sacrifice of oneself among one’s neighbours, ultimately for the love of God. In such love we find truth and goodness. And such love, if truth and goodness are important, must have a fundamental place in the social struggle and politics.

## 2. Politics

This brings us to the second of our three considerations: ‘politics’. In this section I shall argue that Frederic has much to tell us about politics, and that what he has to say is relevant for our own time.

My first point here is that Frederic knew a lot more about politics than we might have thought. During his 40 years, he lived under five different political regimes: the first empire of Napoleon, the absolute monarchy of the Bourbons, the constitutional monarchy of the House of Orléans, the Second Republic of 1848, and the Second Empire. He witnessed three major revolutions, several minor revolutions, and the conservatives’ reign of terror.

In his youth Frederic was a cautious royalist. After witnessing the exploitation of workers and the conservative alliance of wealth and power, he became an advocate for liberty, democracy, republicanism and, arguably, Christian socialism – though he certainly did not see himself as a socialist among his contemporary socialists. Finally, in 1848, he became a political journalist and an activist and was persuaded to stand for election to the French Assembly. So he knew something about politics.

My second point is that the politics of Frederic’s time has bearing on the issues facing us in Australia today. For example, Frederic saw first-hand the effects of the French Revolution on the separation of Church and State and the rise of secular governments. He witnessed the effects of the Industrial Revolution on France’s feudal system. He saw that the new liberal economic



Dr John Honner addresses the audience at St Francis' Church, Melbourne

theory and *laissez faire* free trade policies, which placed faith in self-regulating markets and allowed entrepreneurs to do as they pleased, created the wealth of a rapidly growing middle class, the misery of an increasing number of dependent workers, and the overshadowing of nature. Finally, he saw that the governments of the time did not count the welfare of their poorer citizens among their chief concerns. These are all issues relevant to our own times.

My third point in this section on politics is that Frederic was not only aware of the seriousness of these debates but that he was also well qualified to enter into them. When he was 19 he had already witnessed two revolutions and he deliberately chose to escape the political turmoil about him and focus on research before later entering into political debate. He wrote:

*In the first place, tired of politics, wearied with systems of all kinds...I have resolved to confine myself to my own sphere, to work out my own development, apart and detached from society, to study seriously in order that I may take my part in it later with more advantage to it and to myself. (Bauard, p.21)*

And so he qualified himself. He admits to working 14 or 15 hours a day, 'not counting lectures'. He graduated as Bachelor of Law in 1834, Bachelor of Arts in 1835, Doctor of Law in 1836, was admitted to the Bar 1837, and was awarded the Doctor of Literature degree in 1839. He was proficient in nine languages and was a Professor of Commercial Law before he became Professor of European Literature.

It is also important to note that Frederic developed an interest in economics, particularly in the interrelationship between economic production and political decision-making – what John Stuart Mill called 'political economy'. We know that Frederic

attended a course in political economy 'full of depth and interest' in 1832 (Dirvin, p.22) and that he spent a long time reading the second volume of a work called *Christian Political Economy* (Dirvin, p.73). Finally, all the research that he did in preparing for his great work on the history of Christian civilisation gave him insight into the evolution of new forms of government in Europe and the role of Christian faith and philosophy in those developments.

In 1848 Frederic became, in his own words, 'too much engaged' in 'political agitation' (Bauard, p.293). Despite family needs, increasing illness and academic duties, he was optimistic about the outcomes of the 1848 February Revolution and felt compelled to join the struggle. He helped found a journal called *The New Era* and wrote a series of articles on socialism, the rights of workers and the future of Christian democracy. He contributed five articles to *The New Era* in 10 days (Bauard, p.276). As many as 10,000 copies were sold of each issue.

He wrote, 'I have believed, and I still believe in the possibility of Christian democracy, indeed I believe in nothing else as far as politics are concerned' (Crawford, p.88). 'My knowledge of history', he wrote a few months later, taking a significantly different tack to Marx, 'forces me to the conclusion that democracy is the natural final stage of the development of political progress' (Bauard, p.281). As he put it,

*I accept the sovereignty of the nation and the republican concept. I accept them not as an accident or misfortune of the times which must be resolved, but rather as progress, which must be supported and sustained without a thought of returning to royalty that is henceforth impossible. I want a peaceful republic, protective of all civil, political and religious freedoms and liberties, without the intervention of the State in matters of conscience. (des Rivières, p.126)*



We have a right wing which would like to live under the shadow of the biretta, and a left wing which is still living according to the [radical Catholicism of Lammenais]. Outside both is your servant who, as you know, is rather centrist, finds himself greatly embarrassed, and calls on your prayers.

Frederic Ozanam

While challenging the conservative claim to an absolute right to private property, Frederic was equally critical of the socialist ideal of the state controlling all property. As far as Frederic was concerned, the origins of socialism lay in Christianity, and there was no need to move beyond 'the ancient Christian ideas of justice, charity and fraternity' (Bunard, pp.278-279). We can hear some echoes of Frederic's views in debates about the place of Christian faith in politics today.

Frederic was particularly critical of liberal economic theory, the forerunner of contemporary economic rationalism, and its 'ignominious doctrines... which reduce the entire economy of human life to a calculus of interest' (*Disquisition*, p.837). Frederic argued that liberal theory was individualist and bourgeois, seeing human purpose only as a means of production, following no law other than self-interest, the most insatiable of masters. He castigated liberal economists for turning the poor into instruments for the rich (*Disquisition*, p.838).

While he was obviously no communist, he was aware how conservative Catholic opponents might react to his own advocacy for justice, charity and equality: in 1848 he wrote to priests, asking them to work in the city's poor suburbs, warning them 'do not be dismayed even if the hard-hearted rich, offended by your attitude, should accuse you of communism' (Crawford, p.91).

When he stood for election to the National Assembly in 1848, his political platform ran to only two hundred words. He declares that he sees in the February Revolution a secular version of the Gospel expressed in three words: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Perhaps the Christian and the secular can mix together: for to be 'secular' is different from being 'secularising'.

### 3. Revolutionary

We now come to our third consideration, Frederic as a revolutionary. In 1830 the July Revolution got rid of the Bourbon kings and introduced a constitutional monarchy and laissez faire policies. In 1831, as a consequence of these policies, Frederic saw thousands of silk workers in Lyons openly rebel after their salaries had been arbitrarily reduced. Workplace relations indeed! Subsequent uprisings of workers and peasants culminated in the February Revolution of 1848, which rested on a new alliance between the Church and the working classes. Unfortunately, however, the June Revolution saw conservatives taking power and workers and radicals being brutally suppressed: more than 16,000 workers were killed and another 14,000 taken prisoner. Frederic chose to be on the side of the poor.

For the most part, Frederic stood in the centre of debates, rather than at the edges. Among radical republican students he was a conservative Catholic royalist, but among conservative Catholics he was seen as a dangerous innovator. As he put it in a letter to his mother in 1834 '[we are] called bigots by our

unbelieving fellow students, liberal and reckless by older people' (Auge, p.10). Later, when there were debates in the St Vincent de Paul Society about its relationship with the clergy and about its social reform agenda, Frederic noted,

*We have a right wing which would like to live under the shadow of the biretta, and a left wing which is still living according to the [radical Catholicism of Lammenais]. Outside both is your servant who, as you know, is rather centrist, finds himself greatly embarrassed, and calls on your prayers. (Dirvin, p.151)*

If a centrist, Frederic was no armchair theorist: whether starting the St Vincent de Paul Society or founding a journal or standing for election, he was also an activist. He was something of a revolutionary in his views on the relationship between Church and State and the role of lay Catholics, his views on the difference between welfare and charity, and his views on the responsibility of the State for the protection of the working classes and equal distribution of wealth. Let us look at each of these briefly in turn.

First, on Church and State and the role of the lay Catholic, Frederic was clear that each had their own sphere, and each had to respect the role of the other. He greatly respected ecclesiastical authority and sought and appreciated its support. The traditions and teachings of the Church guided his life. Nonetheless, he was convinced that 'the temporal domain must be kept entirely distinct from the spiritual' (Dirvin, pp.21-22).

In the France of his time, many Catholics still longed for the *ancien regime*, the old way of doing things, when Church and State were intertwined. While he never waned in his respect for ecclesiastical authority, Frederic challenged these conservative Catholics, including those in authority. He thus noted in 1840 that 'Even in the Archbishop's Palace, I have always had the displeasure of a rather dubious reputation' (Pierrard, p.30).

Frederic was also very, very clear that the St Vincent de Paul Society was a lay organisation. It 'should neither be a political party, nor a school, nor a brotherhood [presumably meaning a religious congregation]...but profoundly Catholic at the same time as being secular' (Pierrard, p.23). He sought a structure for the Society 'capable of giving our work a character at once *profoundly Christian and absolutely lay*' (Dirvin, p.152, my emphasis). Absolutely lay, and Catholic, and secular, which means working in this world, this age. This is quite an uncompromising and revolutionary proposition. Usually people like Frederic in the 19th century, who worked as lay people to alleviate the suffering of the poor, ended up founding religious congregations: think of Edmund Rice, Catherine McAuley and Mary Aikenhead. Frederic, however, remained a layman. He anticipated the teaching of Vatican II on the role of the laity in the Church by more than a century.

Secondly, with regard to the difference between welfare and charity, Frederic was equally uncompromising. He notes that some of the more radical members of the St Vincent de Paul Society 'were alarmed at certain acts of ecclesiastical protection, which seemed to them outside encroachments', but other more conservative members thought a lack of piety would see the Society 'degenerating to welfare bureaus' (Dirvin, p.152). Frederic did not want to 'live under the shadow of the biretta', but neither did he want charity to be reduced to welfare. We have already noted that Frederic saw self-sacrificing love as the ultimate calling. In his view, welfare did not achieve this. In a famous passage from his article 'On the Origins of Socialism' in 1848 he wrote

*The knowledge of social well-being and of reform is to be learned, not from books, nor from the public platform, but in climbing the stairs to the poor man's garret, sitting by his bed-side, feeling the same cold that pierces him, sharing the secret of his lonely heart and troubled mind. When the conditions of the poor have been examined...it is then and then only, that we know the elements of that formidable problem, that we begin to grasp it and may hope to solve it. (Baubard, p.279)*

Welfare, typically, has addressed the problem of poverty and misery by creating payments and services. Charity addresses the problem through creating human connections. Any care for the poor and disadvantaged must be personal before it can be professional. It must have an element of relational love rather than be a mere financial transaction.

Nonetheless, Frederic insisted that governments did have an obligation – based on their duty to provide justice – to address poverty. Frederic's essays in *The New Era* demanded that the government make a just and compassionate response to the misery of the poor. He spoke of his concerns about the destitution of the 267,000 unemployed workers in Paris. Frederic noted with the eye of a bean-counter in treasury that

*the public authorities of Paris have not discharged all their responsibility, when they have voted six million francs for the maintenance of unemployed workmen, which is at the rate of three-halfpence per head per day up to the month of the following April; and further that the time has not yet arrived to forget public starvation, simply because winter and cholera are no longer there to remind us of them. (Baubard, p.277)*

When commitments to charity and justice are combined, we inevitably end up with advocacy.

In Frederic's view, welfare was a duty of government. On at least two occasions, however, in 1834 and 1848, the St Vincent de Paul Society helped the government in administering welfare (Baubard,

p.91). The members obliged. Frederic was thus not opposed to welfare, but saw welfare as being effective only if it was enhanced by charity, by love.

In words that anticipate Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical, *God is Love*, Frederic wrote,

*The order of society is based on two virtues: justice and charity. However, justice presupposes a lot of love already... Justice has its limits whereas charity knows none. (Pierrard, p.35)*

This brings us to Frederic's revolutionary views on the protection of workers from free market economics. He had witnessed the exploitation of workers. In 1836, for example, he wrote of his visit to a factory,

*Where I saw industry in all the apparel of its most laborious works, and carried away a sad impression, considering to what toil millions of men must apply themselves to put bread between their teeth, and procure opulent well-being for a small number of the fortunate; and how the intelligence must be brutalised and the heart hardened in the midst of those machines and the immense deployment of material force. (Dirvin, p.89)*

Karl Marx, who brought his recently written *Communist Manifesto* to Paris in 1848, was not the first to condemn the 'exploitation of man by man'. Frederic used it in his lectures on commercial law in 1839 or 1840. In his lecture notes we read,

*Exploitation occurs when the master considers his worker not as a partner nor even as an assistant, but as an instrument out of which he must extract as much service as possible at the smallest possible price. Yet the exploitation of a man by another man is slavery. The worker-machine is nothing more than part of the capital, like the slaves of the ancients. (Pierrard, p.35, Disquisition, p.838, n.201)*

Frederic argued for justice in terms of 'work, rest and wages' (Pierrard, p.34). He defended the rights of workers to form voluntary unions and to receive a natural wage (not a minimum wage), 'sufficient to provide for the necessities of life, the education of his children, and for the support of his old age' (Gregory, p.21). Anticipating Pope Leo XIII's encyclical on Catholic social teaching, *Rerum Novarum*, Frederic argued that 'Salary must be proportionate to profit' (Gregory, p.21). He was even something of a greenie, noting the tension between industrialisation and nature. For example, after he visited the Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace in London, which was a celebration of the triumph of industry, he wrote, 'I was delighted to see as I came out green lawns, fine clumps of trees, sheep grazing in the fields, anything, in fact, that was not a manufactured product' (Baubard, p.338).



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Frederic Ozanam

He was also a revolutionary about tax reform. On 14 April 1848, he wrote in *The New Era* about the financial crisis facing the country. He pleaded with his fellow citizens to consider a progressive tax on superfluous wealth that would solve at one stroke the poverty of the government and the poverty of the workers. He discussed the idea of a progressive tax in several of his letters at this time, with large landowners contributing 25%, medium landowners 10% and small landowners 5% of their superfluous wealth (letter to Dufieux, 31 May 1848; *Disquisition*, pp.848-849; Cholvy p.615).

Frederic's most revolutionary move came in 1848 when he declared to the Catholic readers of *The New Era*, 'Let us defect to the Barbarians'. This provoked a storm of responses. The Barbarians that Frederic referred to here were the working poor, *Les Misérables* of Victor Hugo's depiction. Frederic had in mind the fact that the original Barbarian invasion not only brought about the collapse of the Roman Empire, but also created equal distribution of wealth and then produced the great centuries of European Christendom.

In his view, the time had come to leave 'the camp of statesmen and Kings, who are slaves to selfish and dynastic interests...for the camp of the people and the nation', not to become Barbarians, but to identify with the people 'who have needs and no rights' and 'to devote ourselves instead to the service of the mass of the people...to make them fit for, and worthy of the liberty of the children of God' (Baunard, pp.254-255). In taking this stance, Frederic anticipated the political theologians and liberation theology of the late 20th century, with their criticisms of bourgeois Christianity and their challenge to the Church to live out the Gospel of love and justice in the political struggles of our age.

The challenge for us remains: whose side are we on, in Australia and around the world?

## Conclusion

Frederic held no particular political creed and insisted on no particular political system. He was neither bourgeois nor barbarian, but a follower of Christ. He insisted on liberty, justice, and love. He was driven by a conviction that all people were the beloved of God, and that history was moving towards the Christian Republic of the primitive Church of Jerusalem. While he may seem conservative to some eyes, he was in his own time a revolutionary lay Catholic.

It is a great challenge to be a person of self-sacrificing love in public life. Frederic died, exhausted, at the age of 40. He had given everything. Even as he died, he willed his body to science so that an autopsy might be carried out in order to learn more about the disease that took his own life.

For Frederic, a mystical all-embracing love was everything: authority was a means, liberty was a means, but love was the end and purpose of his life. Love was the underlying value on which all his actions were based. To those of us who struggle in the theatre of society, he offers inspiration and challenge, to add love to justice. 'The order of society is based on two virtues: justice and charity. However, justice presupposes a lot of love already.... Justice has its limits whereas charity knows none.' When love engages with politics, revolutions inevitably occur. Where there are no limits, we run the risk of being criticised as romantics, or visionaries, or revolutionaries, or even saints. Perhaps Frederic was not made for politics, but he still has much to contribute to politics. Politics needs to remember that in the end human life is about love.

We are fortunate to know Frederic, but humbled by his example.

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### **Dr John Falzon**

#### A Short Biography

Dr John Falzon, the respondent, is the Chief Executive Officer of the St Vincent de Paul Society - National Council and is a sociologist working in the area of social justice and social change.

John has written and spoken widely on the structural causes of marginalisation and inequality in Australia and has long been involved in advocacy campaigns, especially in regard to welfare legislation. He has worked in academia, in research and advocacy with non-government organisations and in community development in large public housing estates.

# Response to Dr John Honner's Ozanam Lecture

## Dr John Falzon

Chief Executive Officer, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council

I recently heard a story about a very openly drug-addicted mother bringing her children to a Vinnies Homework Help Program. She spent the first afternoon leaning against the wall, swaying constantly. In explaining why she had brought her children along she said very simply that she didn't want them to end up like her. She wanted them to have a better chance.

There are, for me, two very powerful motifs in Dr Honner's lecture tonight. Both of them resonate with this little story. Both of them rest on the fulcrum of Frederic's revolutionary love.

The two motifs are *sacredness* and *liberation*. Together they form the heart of the social justice imperative that permeates the scriptures.

*Sacredness* screams out at us, for instance, in the passage from *Exodus* where God says to Moses: "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

In the same passage *liberation* looms large in that incredible prototype of all of God's promises: "I have witnessed the misery of my people in Egypt and have heard them crying out because of their oppressors. I know what they are suffering and have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians..."

The drug-addicted mother, like most of those who have been left out or pushed out in Australia today, is amongst the most despised in our society. She is regularly and roundly blamed and condemned for her choices and for her ongoing dependence on others.

She is characterised by many as being nothing short of barbaric because of her unseemly behaviour in a seemingly civilised country. Little, or no analysis, is ever performed on the social and economic structures that have slammed shut the doors of opportunity and inclusion in her face. Little attention is given to the likelihood that she will be subjected to some of the harshest features of recent welfare legislation combined with coercion at the low end of the labour market.

For Frederic, and for those who share his vision, the place where this mother is standing, even if she is swaying against a wall; the place where she is standing, is sacred ground. Her story is sacred. Her love for her children; the fact that she wants for them an education she did not have, is sacred. Her life is sacred.

This sacredness is a sign of something absolutely revolutionary: that God is on her side.



**“Even when they call us mad, when they call us subversives and communists and all the other epithets they put on us, we know we only preach the subversive witness of the Beatitudes, which have turned everything upside down.”**

Martyred Archbishop  
Oscar Romero

Yes. The God of the Bible takes sides. Not with those of one religion as against another, even though the Bible has often been domesticated to make it appear thus.

No. The God of the Bible, the God at the centre of Frederic’s revolutionary practice, is on the side of the poor, on the side of the oppressed.

In taking their side, the liberation that is envisaged is of the kind that surgically strikes at the heart of that which causes or exacerbates their suffering, their oppression, their exclusion. We are all charged with this inescapably hard but joyful mission. The seeds of liberation are right here. We stand on sacred ground; ground on which suffering has been known and hope inflamed. When we commit to stand in solidarity with the despised we join them in becoming “new forces and new passions” springing up in the bosom of society.

Frederic declared: ‘Let us defect to the Barbarians.’ As Dr Honner reminded us tonight, “The Barbarians that Frederic referred to here were the working poor, *Les Miserables*...”

But there are two sides to Frederic’s declaration. In calling for solidarity with the poor he was also calling for a stance against the structures that made them poor, kept them poor and blamed them for their poverty. He was calling for a liberating critique of the causes of their oppression.

As Dr Honner pointed out: “In taking this stance, Frederic anticipated the political theologians and liberation theology of the late 20th century...”

It was, however, the 17th century in which an anonymous English wit penned the following piece of doggerel:

*The Law locks up the man or woman  
Who steals the goose from off the Common,  
But leaves the greater villain loose  
Who steals the Common from under the goose.*

Indeed, then as now, the common wealth and common good are systematically purloined. Then, as now, however, it is far easier to construct a method of individual punishment in place of a vision of social justice.

In the past decade in Australia we have witnessed a 50% increase in the number of people imprisoned. Can we ignore the fact that during roughly the same period we have seen a 28% reduction in real terms in the level of Commonwealth funding for Indigenous, Community and Public Housing?

When Frederic issued his clarion call to go over to the side of the oppressed he provoked a storm of responses. Judging by the media responses we receive when we make statements that are comparatively tame, not much has changed.

But, as the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero put it so beautifully:

*“Even when they call us mad,  
when they call us subversives and communists  
and all the other epithets they put on us,  
we know we only preach the subversive witness  
of the Beatitudes,  
which have turned everything upside down.”*

The Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth urged us to pray with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. One, he argued, reveals who is on the heart of God: the poor, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised and the marginal; the other where to seek them.

Frederic struggled for a just society, for a “turning upside down” to use the revolutionary principle of the Beatitudes. The sacredness of those on the margins, their liberation from the structures that exclude them; this was what he lived for. This is where he encountered his God: incarnate in the flesh, the blood, the stories of the poor. There is nothing more beautiful or more human than this struggle.

This gives us comfort inasmuch as it galvanises us in our resolve to prophetically denounce that which excludes and announce that which can liberate. In a country where 2 out of 3 children who need support from a homelessness service are turned away, it should not be too hard to know the problems nor to identify the solutions.

As the Social Policy Research Centre has demonstrated, it would take an estimated 2-3% of our Gross Domestic Product to lift everyone out of poverty in Australia. The fact that we do not is a matter of choice, not affordability. It is easier to single out the bad choices of individuals. It is, however, more honest for us as a nation, to focus on our collective choices.

Unless we have the courage to take the side of the marginalised, the Australia at the dawn of the 21st century will in some ways be more akin to the Australia at the dawn of the 19th century: a land where exploitation and dispossession are the rule rather than the exception; a land divided rather than diverse; a country ruled by fear instead of a people living in hope.

## References

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