

Christ Church Cathedral Sermon December 3rd, 2023.

Kathleen Lynch

Good morning and thank you for asking me to speak to you on this first Sunday of Advent. I would like to introduce myself, personally. My name is Kathleen Lynch and I am originally from County Clare. I was nurtured as a child, within a strong Christian tradition, a tradition grounded in the praxis not just the theory of Christianity. There was a strong emphasis, on not being a 'whited sepulchre', trying not to be hypocritical.

I was also reared to be questioning and searching. I still am. You might ask if I pray? If praying means asking for wisdom daily to guide me, to enlighten me and to give me the courage to know goodness and do good, Yes, I do pray.

I would like to begin my sermon with a brief comment on the theme of this Advent series **Darkness into Light**. When I read this first, it seemed obvious what it meant in Christian terms. Yet, it made me reflect about language. If words matters, and if metaphors matter, then perhaps we need to reflect on the metaphor of darkness as the symbol of evil and malevolence, and whiteness as a symbol of virtue, purity and transcendence. I realise that the metaphors in the

Bible are of their time. The Bible was written long before the Europeanisation of Christianity and its representation of Jesus Christ as white. However, as metaphors are read in cultural and historical context, the normative and moral consequences of categorising blackness or darkness as a symbol of absence, or even evil, is not insignificant. As the cognitive linguistsⁱ have shown, much of what we are hardwired to see, feel and notice about the world is culturally contingent, driven by strong emotions rather than by reason. Metaphors play an important role in galvanising political feelings. At a time when colour-based racism is embedded in so much of Western European and Irish thinking, frequently demonising people whose skin is black or brown, as 'Outsiders' as the 'Other', we need to ask if secular and religious metaphors may feed this negative narrative subliminally.

From Injustice and Violence to Hope and Love

It is a very difficult time socio-politically for those who want to live life by Christian principles such as *Love thy neighbour as thyself* or *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. For me that is the great challenge both personally and politically. Our culture is embedded in the values and morals of possessive individualism that are institutionalised in the economic and political systems as capitalism. Capitalism and greed are not new but what was once merely tolerated has now been made virtuous. Those who display their wealth,

and even abuse the power that wealth gives them, are adorned and congratulated.

The Morals of Capitalism are antithetical to Christian Ethics

People often say that capitalism has no ethics or morals, this is untrue. Capitalism operates on a set of ethical principles; however many of these are deeply antithetical to Christian values.

In economic terms, it is grounded on the principle of profit-making, often at all costs. The *mean and lean* ideology of neoliberal capitalism, for example, leads to businesses being closed down, not because they are not profitable, but because they are not profitable enough for shareholders.

Capitalism produces extremes of wealth on the one hand, and low wages, precarity and insecurity on the other. Insecurities fuel political resentment culminating in the rise of the extreme right and a new fascism that we are witnessing all over Europe.

At a cultural level, neoliberal capitalism rewards a narcissistic form of competitive individualism producing a new social 'nature' in humans characterized by indifference to vulnerability in the body public, what Adorno (2005)ⁱⁱ termed 'bourgeois coldness'. It finds expression in the nomenclature of

‘winners’ and ‘losers’. Being competitive, winning and consuming have moved from being amoral practices to virtues.

While capitalism produces wealth inequalities, it capitalises on racial and gendered inequalities thereby perpetuating many eliminable forms of human (and animal) suffering. Moreover, by virtue of their excessive wealth, the super-rich and powerful are able to undermine democracy (or threaten to undermine it) throughout the worldⁱⁱⁱ. In order to survive in an intensely competitive global market, companies are forced to produce more and more goods we do not need, leading to excessive consumption resulting in waste and environmental destruction.

As it takes time to make money, capitalism also involves diminishing our time and capacity to care for one another.

An Ethics of Care

But there is an alternative. It is possible to promote and advance an ethics of care and love to supplant the ethics of capitalism.

First it involves creating basic **Equality of Economic and Political Conditions**.

This matters culturally, not just economically. When economic and political inequalities are deep, there is a tendency to regard people at the top of society as hugely important and those near the bottom as almost worthless. Deep

economic inequalities make people fearful: they create resentments, anxieties and fears; people worry about their appearances, how they look, where they live, their clothes, what kind of house or car they have, who they socialise with, where their children go to school etc. Inequalities produces ‘socially evaluative threats’, basically fears and anxieties about not being valued. A major study in the UK, in 2007, found that the bottom 20 per cent of male income-earners were thirty-five times more likely to have depression than men in the top 20% (Wilkinson and Pickett 2018: 40^{iv}).

As the philosopher Michael Sandel observes^v, *Inequalities feed into the human psyche leading to the hubris among the elite and despair among the unsuccessful*. Social injustices produce a sense of valuelessness among those who are not defined as ‘successful’. This is a serious political problem as well as a social one. We know from research that it is the people who feel that they are ‘failures’ by society’s standards who are supporting fascist-type movements in Europe and elsewhere^{vi}.

There is nothing inevitable about the political and economic order of our society; it is ours to change. There are good business models built on cooperative and solidaristic principles throughout the world, most especially worker-owner

cooperative where those who produce own what is produced, and where wealth is shared among workers, their families and communities^{vii} rather than being concentrated in oligarchies. Currently, there are business owners in Ireland who are actively working to co-operatise their family businesses when they retire. They have a vision for the future that is not simply profit driven. They do not want to see their businesses sold off to companies that will sell it off in a short time leaving all the local people redundant. They are ethical people who want their workers to remain employed in their own communities.

Love, Care And Solidarity

Above all, for me, a Christian society is a socially just one, a loving and caring one. To make this happen, the ethics of care and love need to replace the ethics of capitalism. Why? Because life in both its human and non-human forms cannot be lived well without care and love.

Three Circles of Affective Care Relations

We live within circles of care: the outer circle is where we show care for unknown others through **solidarity**; the secondary **circle** involves caring for those who we know formally through work, our local communities,

congregations, professions, etc., while the **inner circle** involves love for intimate others.

At the outer tertiary or political level, care involves **solidarity**, working for the collective good economically, politically and culturally. It involves building caring public and private institutions, and services; and it also involves ***being good ancestors*** socially and environmentally for future generations on this earth.

At the secondary level, I am talking about **caring for** our neighbours, local communities, and work colleagues, looking out for and looking after those with whom we liaise in our daily life. It means building care time into our social , economic and political institutions.

The ethics of care also calls us to do Love Labour. to give time and attention to those to whom we are intimately related. This is the inner circle of care. As with all caring, love labouring takes a lot of time. Unlike others forms of care, it cannot be assigned to another as it is embedded in the relationship itself, it is inalienable and non-commodifiable. *There is no quality time without quantity time.*

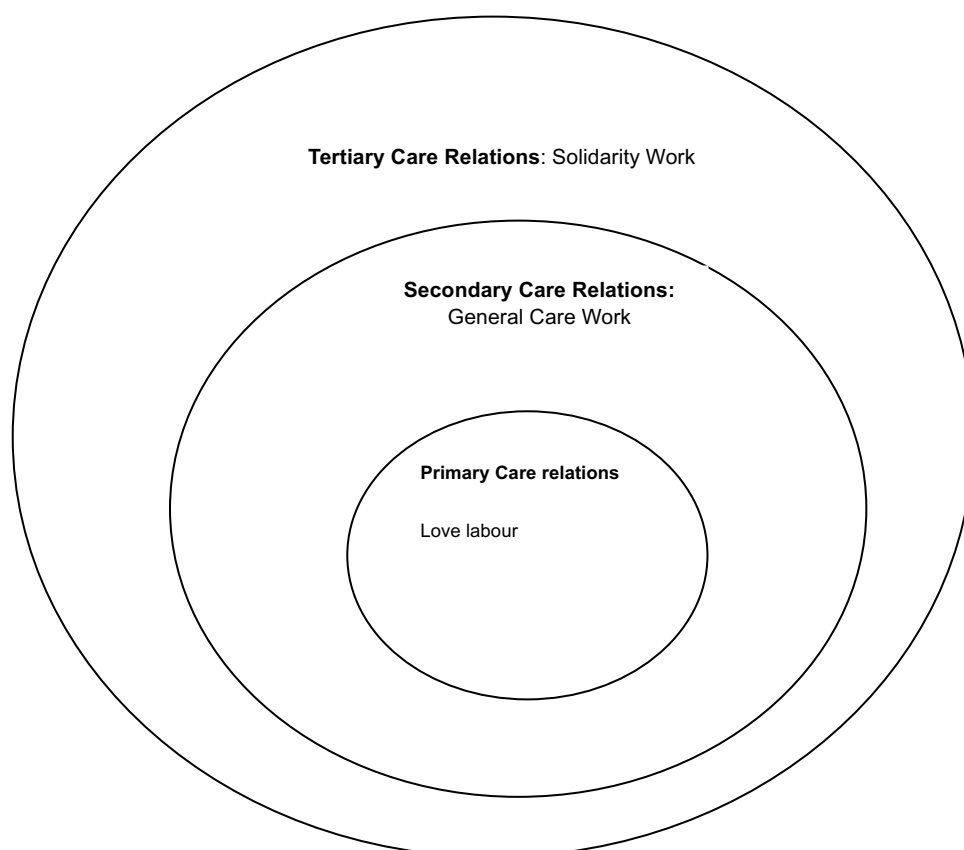
The ethics of care commands us not only to give money therefore but also to build social, political and economic institutions that are built on social justice

and caring principles. It requires us **to create time** for others in need, not only personally but also politically, culturally and emotionally.

Concluding Remark

The Christian value of ‘Love thy neighbour as thyself’ is undermined by the values of incessant consumerism and narcissistic possessive individualism that are endemic to neoliberal capitalism. But we are in a position to challenge this as we are the makers of history^{viii}.. Through the teaching and practice of social justice and caring principles we can inspire people to live the spirit of Christmas, the spirit of love, all year round.

Affective Care Relations: love, care, and solidarity



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- ⁱ See for example, George Lakoff, 2008. *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century American Politics with an 18th-Century Brain*. New York: Viking Press.
- ⁱⁱ Adorno, T. W. 2005. *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Pickford, H. W. New York: Columbia University Press.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Streeck, W. 2016. *How Will Capitalism End?* London: Verso.
- ^{iv} Wilkinson, R. G. and Pickett, K. 2018. *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everybody's Wellbeing*. London: Allen Lane
- ^v Sandel, M. 2020. *The Tyranny of Merit*. London: Penguin.
- ^{vi} Hochschild, A. R. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: Free Press.
- ^{vii} Roelants, B., Eum, H., Esim, S., Novkovic, S. (eds.) 2019. *Cooperatives and the World of Work*. London: Routledge.
- ^{viii} Lynch, K. 2022. *Care and Capitalism: Why Affective Equality Matters for Social Justice*. Cambridge. Polity Press.