

'Come, Sun of Justice...'

This December issue of *Sofia* is called *Advent and Utopia*. Leading up to Christmas at the winter solstice, Advent invokes a Sun of Justice to grow and lighten our darkness. Powerfully and poetically, it expresses the age-old longing for a utopian society where justice and peace shine upon Earth.

Sofia is grateful to *Red Pepper* for kind permission to reprint Mike Marqusee's article *Let's Talk Utopia*. As Marqusee points out: 'We've been taught to fear utopian thinking, which is denounced as not only impractical but positively dangerous.' But, he argues, 'While there are dangers in utopian thinking, the much greater danger is its absence. The reality is that we don't "talk utopia" nearly enough.' In a struggle for social justice we not only need to say what is wrong with the present but to imagine a better future. 'We can draw,' he says, 'on a rich tradition going back to the biblical prophets and found in almost every human society.' He warns: 'A utopia without dissent and argument is a nightmare.' Utopia is a good society, not a perfect one. It must be participatory and 'more of a process, a journey'.

In the last few days (feeling too old and rheumatic to camp, besides being the world's most useless camper) I have been visiting the protest camp in St Paul's churchyard (see picture on the back cover). The camp's main focus is the huge inequality in our society, and the protesters have dramatically raised the issues at stake in a way that none of us can ignore. Camping at the foot of the steps of the great West door of the cathedral, they have challenged the Church and some of the debate has been framed in Christian language. The Christian gospel and language is part of that rich utopian tradition, which belongs to all of us, whether we believe in supernatural beings or not.

Rejecting the supernatural, an important part of *Sofia's* task is to translate that Christian language into secular terms, 'holding fast to what is good' for the sake of humanity. As I write we are coming up to the season of Advent, which not only looks forward to Christmas as a commemoration of the birth of Jesus long ago, but whose liturgy is charged both with the utopian longings of the Old Testament prophets and the

gospel promise of what Jesus called 'the kingdom of God', that is, the coming on Earth of a kind society that is good news for the poor. In my article *Advent and Utopia* I explore this further.

Also in this issue, David Warden takes a critical look at Paul van Buren's classic *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*. From Australia, Peter Bore writes about the 'troublesome priest' Peter Kennedy, sacked by the Vatican because his church was pursuing too much 'liberation theology', and who has set up 'St Mary's Community in Exile'.

In *The Strange Story of Prophet John Wroe* Dominic Kirkham looks at one of the weirder and wackier stories of millenarian expectations and highlights the dangers of the claim to be the 'chosen people', especially when those making the claim are rich and powerful: 'The conviction of a special destiny under God became a defining characteristic of the American psyche with its own historical narrative.' So as with all myths, discernment is needed. Utopian yearnings and expectations must be subject to the criterion of a sane and kindly humanism.

Advent looks forward to Christmas, which celebrates the incarnation of the word, that is the story of the 'divine word' coming down to us, becoming fully human, embodied in humanity and active in the world. Or, we could say the story expresses the utopian desire of humankind to become kinder, less unkind. The way John puts it at the beginning of his Gospel is: 'The word became flesh and **pitched its tent** (ἐσκηνώσεν: *eskenosen*) among us.' That word was Jesus talking about good news for the poor, and the dispossessed inheriting the Earth. Recently that word has been going out more clearly from the tents in St Paul's churchyard than from the cathedral. The Cathedral seems to have realised this, as it has withdrawn its threat of legal action. As I write, the camp is still there.