

# Publishing Editor's column

REFERENCE was made in a recent editorial to the worsening inequality in our world, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the satisfaction of the most basic of human needs, food. While shoppers in the affluent West are faced with a bewildering choice of products to spend their money on, hundreds of millions of people are undernourished, even starving. I was shocked by a recent report that about a quarter of all food purchased in the UK ends up being thrown away, and constant references in the media to the growing problem of obesity indicates that many people are consuming far more than they need.

We have heard much of late about the growing financial problems in the world. Another, potentially more serious, problem for most of the world has emerged quite quickly in the last couple of months: a growing food shortage. Even for those of us in the affluent West, there have been considerable price rises in basic foodstuffs, but this pales into insignificance in comparison with other countries, where there have been shortages leading to panic buying, greedy profiteering and riots, especially in Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia. There are a number of causes of this:

- 1 Countries that have rapidly expanded their economies in recent years, China in particular, want to eat more meat, necessitating devoting land to producing animal feed instead of food for humans.
- 2 Growing fears of global warming have led many countries, especially the USA, to devote land to producing crops for the production of bio-fuels in order to reduce demand for fossil fuels and (supposedly) cut back carbon emissions. The result has been drastically reduced food stocks in the world.
- 3 Persistent drought in Australia, flooding in southeast Asia and poor weather in Europe in recent years have cut back food production.
- 4 Countries in Asia and Africa have invested in industrialisation rather than agriculture to satisfy the West's demand for cheap goods.
- 5 Profiteering by speculators buying up stocks, and governments banning the export of food, have worsened the problem.
- 6 Population numbers are still rapidly increasing in many countries, and we have largely got to the end of the benefits in increased production as a result of the 'Green Revolution' of the

1970s, the use of scientific farming techniques to increase food production dramatically.

All this has led to wheat prices increasing by 130 per cent in a year, soya by seventy-four per cent and rice by seventy per cent. Increased food prices in the UK have no significant impact on most people, but it is very different in the poorer countries of the world. Worse may yet come. If food production suffers from bad weather or disease in the coming summer, world food stocks are well short of being adequate to cope. This is potentially disastrous for millions in less affluent areas, and could become a major problem even for the affluent West, where it does not take much to induce panic buying and consequent shortages.

Although we have heard much in recent months about the credit crunch and soaring debt levels, leading to a recession, I have not seen anything about the effect rising food prices and growing shortages could have on the financial situation. There are already indications that people are spending less on consumer goods; and rising food prices, along with ever-increasing fuel costs, will surely make people even more reluctant to spend on non-essentials, with all the consequences this will have on the retail trade and the wider economy. For those of us caught up in the modern 'spend' culture it will do us good to be reminded that "a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things which he possesseth" (Lk. 12:15).

The Master said that the days before his coming again would be marked by, amongst other things, famines (Lk. 21:11). There have been famines from time to time in recent decades, mainly in Africa due to adverse weather. It may be we are moving into a time when these will get worse. The problem is intensified in many countries by the accumulation of immense wealth by a few and a lack of willingness to provide for the poor. Also, many governments are hopelessly corrupt, and much aid provided by the large aid agencies fails to reach those for whom it is intended. There is little evidence of governments following the wise example of Joseph and storing up food in times of plenty for use when times are worse.

What a contrast it will be in the Kingdom, when the world will be blessed with rich harvests, and the inequalities of the present age will be no more! We pray for that day to come soon.

*Tony Benson*