

A Reflection – Measure for Measure

by our rather philosophical St John's parishioner, Colin Davey

The Big Mac Index (BMI; not to be confused with Body Mass Index, although one suspects they might be connected) compares the cost of that iconic McDonald's hamburger in different countries. Set against the exchange rate, it provides a measure of currency and economic under/over value. In practical terms, for travellers it's a snapshot of how expensive a country is. But BMI is also informative on a number of humanistic levels. In particular, it allows one to compare the average working time needed in different countries to purchase a Big Mac: to us, a burger appears very affordable in Indonesia, but (according to Wikipedia) it still takes more than an hour for the average indigenous worker to earn one.

I wonder whether it's possible to formulate a similar comparative index for the value of a human life? Not an easy thing to pin down, since there is as much subjectivity as objectivity among the measures. It would mean putting an actual number on inequality, injustice, prejudice and indifference, and doing so with complete impartiality. For the purposes of this reflection, we'll put those obstacles aside. Let's call it the Life Value Index (LVI), and perhaps it has a conflict (LVlc) variant, as we may predict with some confidence that values will drop for the majority during times of war or natural disaster.

Unlike BMI, the LVI would reach well beyond pairwise comparisons between geographical boundaries, such as LVlc for Gaza, Israel, Russia or Ukraine, to encompass a much broader human demographic. For example, LVI might report on the status and experiences of the Jewish diaspora throughout history, or capture the perceived value of conscripts and oligarchs, politicians and hostages, missionaries and juntas, so-called celebrities and us 'ordinary' folk, or quantify attitudes towards the disabled, homeless, illegal and legal migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, the elderly, terminally ill, unborn, and so on.

There are so many people, perhaps the majority of the world's population, whose lives seem to others to be of little value, as 'cheap as chips'. Perhaps these poor masses huddle under an LVI well below 0.1, in stark contrast to the fortunate few who greedily protect an LVI in the hundreds, purchased off the back of a massively disproportionate impact on the environment and resources of the former. Whoever decided LVI could be anything other than 1, for anybody, anywhere, at any time? Only Jesus died for us all.

NB: I think the resurrection LVI (LVlr) might be minus 1. If so, since any number divided by a negative number likewise becomes negative, then anyone who enters into a relationship with Jesus is pledged eternal life. My dodgy maths says so.