TFTD 210214

GOOD MORNING

Food banks are great things. They have mushroomed - forgive the pun - across Scotland. Community groups, churches and other faith groups work together - glad to be able to do something practical to meet an obvious and urgent need.

But Archbishop Vincent Nichols and other church leaders down South claim that government welfare reforms are forcing people into 'heat or eat' choices. They do that as faith leaders because the bible constantly expresses what some have called a 'bias to the poor'. And in response the Prime Minister defends the changes as a "moral mission" to return people to work from a life of dependency on the state.

My own view is that, however good the Food Banks are, it is an indictment of our very wealthy society that we should need them. At that level, it's a question of human dignity. And I hope they won't become a permanent part of our life.

I've spent a lot of my life a a priest in contact with poverty. In my parish when I worked in Northern Ireland, I saw high unemployment and social deprivation force many people into reliance on welfare payments. People didn't choose that and they didn't like it. But many had no choice. And that lack of choice eroded initiative and self-reliance to produce dependency. And dependency eventually can sometimes create sense of entitlement.

I can understand that it is those cycles which the government wishes to break. The risk is that zealous or over-zealous attempts to do that risk creating a society which is simply un-compassionate. It's un-compassionate because it takes vulnerable people who have very limited autonomy in their lives and risks appearing to punish them for that.

This is a real debate which measures the virtues of responsibility and self-reliance against our desire to be the kind of society which recognises and responds to genuine need. A society which is mature, responsible and compassionate will want to give expression to both.