

This review by Paul Lusk appeared under the title **Robin Hood Theology?** in *Evangelicals Now* in January 2003

FAITH WORKS: Lessons on spirituality and social action

By Jim Wallis

SPCK.

196 pages. £12.99. ISBN 0 281 05525 4

Clunk! An unusually thick envelope arrives with the post. A book! From *Evangelicals Now*! For me to review!

But what is this? The enthusiastic endorsement on the cover is from Archbishop Desmond Tutu. An author's foreword for this new British edition tells us 'Robin Hood has always been my favourite English theologian'. Another foreword, from the Bishop of Bath and Wells, says the author's wife is one of Anglicanism's 'first women priests, who has provided much of the inspiration for the BBC's Vicar of Dibley.' Hmm... gonna have a lot of problems persuading EN readers about this one!

Ok, so it's not Jim Wallis's ecclesiology that JEB wants me to explain (Tutu meets Dibley meets Robin Hood is pretty much it). Faith Works is sub titled 'Lessons on Spirituality and Social Action' and Jim Wallis is one of the people that George W. Bush and Tony Blair like having around when they run seminars on the new political commitment to 'Faith Communities'.

He describes growing up in a Brethren congregation in Detroit, where he loved the piety and grace of his family but one day noticed something odd about his own church and all the others that shared their fellowship - they consisted entirely of white people. Jim went out and found there were black people in Detroit, lots of them, with lots of churches.

It didn't take young Jim long to figure out a connection between exclusively white churches, an all-white power structure and godly black families living in daily fear of their children being picked up and abused by the all-white police force. He read his Bible and concluded that something was seriously wrong. Jim started to do something about it, first in the civil rights movement, and nowadays -after returning to his Christian roots - through a Washington DC-based ministry called the 'Sojourners.' Faith Works has many stories about Christian-led street-work making a radical difference in life at the sharpest of the sharp ends - the drug-ridden, disenfranchised no-go areas of American inner cities.

We don't have to sign up to the Tutu-Dibley stuff to give thanks for this testimony to God's power and purpose in a corrupted world - or to be led to question whether our own churches, like those of 1960s Detroit, have a social presence which means we 'talk the talk' of biblical Christianity, but do not 'walk the walk'.

Jim Wallis writes about new networks -horizontal connections between Christians of different denominations - that start from a base in these demanding situations and go on to lead an enquiry into the alignment of the gospel and social responsibility. But his political analysis, like his theology, is frustratingly vague. He follows many Anglicans in claiming churches have a 'prophetic' insight into the 'common good'. This formula seems to me to confuse advocacy with prophecy. To claim 'prophetic' political insight is an unbiblical conceit, which wishes away the need for hard thinking over such tricky choices as equality versus wealth-creation, liberty versus social duty.

Still, the stories are good. A favourite comes early in the book. It is that dangerous moment in South Africa shortly before the release of Nelson Mandela. Crowds have been denied permission to demonstrate. They gather in the Anglican Cathedral, a seething congregation ringed by riot police with guns and walkie-talkies.

A tiny man speaks from the pulpit. The state and its forces have power, great power, he concedes. But now they have picked a fight with God. It is a fight no human can win. You, you policemen, have already lost. And a great, familiar beam spreads across the face of Archbishop Tutu. 'We are inviting you to join the winning side!' The anger subsides, dancing and cheering break out, the police slink off: they can fight hate, but not love.

Tutu looked ahead, beyond black majority rule, to the conditions that could sustain democracy and peace - to a civil society founded on conciliating love. This great example of Christian social leadership drew on wells of faith and biblical culture dug long ago in, and across, the desperately divided communities of black and white, poor and rich, African and European. Without this shared memory of Christian love-language, it seems to me, Tutu's marvellous appeal could not have begun to succeed.

Faith, hope and love: and the greatest of these - well, EN readers know the rest.