

Tackling poverty – a role for wee rich people like us

Sunday 6th February

Lord.

Confront us with the immensity of your compassion, the splendour of your justice and the fire of your love.

Amen.

The disciples wrestled with how to address poverty, and every generation before and since has had to face the same questions. Jesus' words continue to haunt us from back through the centuries "The poor you will always have with you." Today is Poverty Action Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent, where churches around the country are reflecting on the problem of poverty. "What thoughtful rich people call the problem of poverty, thoughtful poor people call with equal justice a problem of riches." R H Tawney.

I've really wrestled with this talk – it's something I feel strongly in my guts, but that can be the hardest thing to articulate. It's a torch I've inherited from my Grandad, whose best friend at school in Clydebank died of malnutrition, a torch kept lit by a Church of Scotland youth group where I first discovered "free" trade had a cost, and one I carry now in my job as the parliamentary officer for Citizens Advice Scotland. It feels like a feeble contribution to a massive problem – but I'm beginning to think that's exactly the point.

The purpose of this talk is not to harangue you, make you feel that all too familiar guilt. But I do want to inspire you, encourage you, even challenge you, that we small people can make a difference in a big world. 200 years ago the world ended at the edge of your village. Addressing poverty and inequality meant helping those around you. Your neighbour was literally your neighbour. Now we have "compassion fatigue" – through mass media we are aware of so much suffering that we feel powerless to do anything about it. And many problems don't even make it on to the TV.

As a nation we are more prosperous than ever before. There are record numbers of millionaires and unemployment is at the lowest level it has been for more than 25 years. Yet over 3 million children in the United Kingdom continue to live in poverty, whilst looking abroad, the average life expectancy in Zambia is just 33.

So what is a Biblical response to poverty, here and abroad?

Like many theological issues, there have been many responses.

Prior to the reformation nuns and monks would take a vow of poverty and the accepted view was that poverty was a virtue. Then came Calvin, thundering against idolatry and reforming the church. He saw wealth as a sign of God's favour and therefore of predestination. So we were catapulted from exalting poverty to exalting wealth. Where before some in the Church had done nothing to alleviate poverty, since it was a blessing, now some in the Church did everything they could to gain wealth, spurred on by the fear that if they failed, it was a sign they were not one of God's elect.

That was over 400 years ago – and yet in the 20th century you could still find the modern equivalents. Liberation theology arose in South America as a reaction to the perceived indifference of the Catholic Church to the poverty around it. They reinterpreted Scripture with a bias towards the poor, said that salvation comes in the form of social justice, and that sin was the failure of brotherhood. At the same time, a few thousand miles north, the Health and Wealth preachers of the Pentecostal movement inherited Calvin's view of wealth and took it to its logical conclusion. If you are poor it is because you lack faith – if you ask for a Rolls Royce and you have bicycle faith, you'll get a bicycle.

It's fair to say there have been a lot of opposing viewpoints over the centuries. So what can we say?

Well for starters a touch of humility wouldn't go astray. Maybe we have to accept that through the ages the church has spent half its time tackling poverty and the other half entrenching it. Christians bought slaves, and Christians abolished slavery, Christians established apartheid, and Christians celebrated its downfall. Maybe we haven't quite got it all figured out, and most of us are aware we aren't living exactly as we ought to be. But shame at our own hypocrisy – and a harsh judgement of it in others – doesn't seem to get us very far.

You see, what we need is a theology that encompasses both justice and mercy, both responsibility for our own actions and responsibility to act on others behalf. A theology that encompasses selling all possessions as well as the extravagant use of jars of perfume. Concern for the poor and an acknowledgement that human nature means they will always be with us. It's a terrible problem, full of practical dilemma. If I sell all I have and give to the poor but have not love... said Paul. But like all dilemmas we need to let it drive us to our knees.

It is when you're on your knees that you come face to face with the nature and character of God. The Scriptures we have heard are fraction of what is in the whole Bible. Christ has far more to say about money than he does about sex. Can we say the same of the church?

There are some conclusions to be drawn, some strength for feeble knees. Poverty can't be a virtue – where's the virtue in malnutrition or being harassed by debt collectors? Poverty has no intrinsic goodness. And neither does wealth. Wealth isn't a virtue – a virtue is something honourable and praiseworthy in itself. And God isn't some divine slot machine or benevolent funding board.

Wealth is not a divine obligation, it is a divine gift. Gifts come with responsibility to use them properly.

To whom much is given much is expected. This is not meant to be a rod across our backs. It's inspiring – I expect my son Duncan to walk, because he's capable of more than crawling. It's a huge compliment – not only does God give to us but he expects a lot of us.

The phrase “grow up” can be a withering criticism or a joyful exhortation. I suspect it’s the latter. Giving out of guilt is like a straitjacket on the soul – we share our emptiness. Joyful giving opens the windows on heaven - as we share out of the fullness of what we have first received. Let’s set off towards God with the gifts we’ve been given – and see what happens.

It is clear to me that God doesn’t just believe in social justice – he is social justice. What is the Trinity if not the ultimate demonstration in social justice – the Spirit crying out as the Father kills the Son for the crimes of the people they jointly loved into being?

Let’s just dwell on that for a moment before I go on to look at some practicalities.

So we have a mandate for action – but what does poverty look like in Scotland and abroad in the 21st century, and what can we do about it?

Firstly in Scotland

I just want to highlight a few facts. Often in the church we’re more aware of the problems overseas than on our front doorstep.

Joseph Rowntree was a Christian businessman who decided to tackle poverty, not entrench it. The latest figures from the Joseph Rowntree foundation show that 1.1 million Scots are living in low income households. That’s 22% of the population. Furthermore, one in three Scottish workers are paid less than £6.50 an hour, the majority of them women. Looking at Edinburgh in particular, it is among the worst areas for levels of drug misuse, overcrowding and children living in low-income families.

So Edinburgh is one of the worst areas for child poverty. And the problem with child poverty is that it affects how you get on at school. For people aged 25-50, the report found that half of all those who lack Higher grade qualifications are in low paid work, whilst it rises to two thirds for those with no qualifications at all.

It’s a conspiracy of circumstance – poverty leads to poor education and poor education leads to poverty. Whilst some of us are worrying about inheritance tax, for others their only inheritance is to continue in a legacy of low income, poor education and few prospects.

That is oppression. Psalm 103 says that God works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.

This is a brief sketch – I hope to put a pile of resources on the website so you can find out more for yourself, but first I want to turn our attention overseas.

It’s here that the statistics start to get really unbelievable.

600 million children in absolute poverty

30,000 children dying needlessly every single day from preventable disease

38 million living with HIV/AIDS, 95% of them in the developing world, 20 million dead, 15 million children orphaned

One woman dying every minute from problems in pregnancy or childbirth

\$10 billion a year demanded from Africa in debt repayments – exactly the same amount it would cost to provide universal primary education for the entire continent.

The problem in Zambia is not just that they spend twice as much on debt repayments as they do on education but that half of the teachers they train every year die of AIDS.

I could go on, but the numbers begin to lose meaning. It's devastating. What on earth can we do about this profound injustice?

These numbers are way beyond our own means to help, they overwhelm us. But as you may already know the most incredible opportunity for us we people to make a real difference presents itself this year. A chance to make poverty history. To see trade justice instead of the exploitation of 'free' trade, to see debt cancelled instead of increased, to see more and better aid instead of cuts and recycling of aid budgets. Make poverty history is a remarkable and unique UK alliance of charities, trade unions, celebrities, campaigning groups and faith communities who are mobilising around key opportunities in 2005 to drive forward the struggle against poverty and injustice.

I was at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton last November with work and was actually in the auditorium when the rock star Bono addressed the Labour Party on the make poverty history campaign. I want to show just a few minutes from his speech as he put it better than I ever could.

"Anyway, what I'm telling you is 2005, when Britain takes the reins of the G-8 and EU, this is it. And if we don't get there in 2005 -- if we don't get there in 2005 -- I know where these people park their cars.

Listen, this is a real moment coming up, this could be real history, this could be something that your children, your children's children, that our whole generation, will be remembered for at the beginning of the 21st century.

Putting right a relationship that has been so very wrong for so very long. This is not just heart - it's smart. Onerous debt burdens, decreasing aid levels, duplicitous trade rules, no wonder people are pissed off with us.

Listen, I know what this looks like, rock star standing up here, shouting imperatives others have to fulfil. But that's what we do, rock stars. Rock stars get to wave flags, shout at the barricades, and escape to the South of France. We're unaccountable. We behave accordingly. But not you. You can't. You can't do that. See, we're actually counting on you.

Politicians have to make the fight, do the work, and get judged by the results. The weight of expectation is a heavy burden. Hang it on a rock band and that's usually when they make a crap album. The weight of history is so heavy. It's a huge responsibility to be the repository of people's dreams, to be their hope for the future.

So Tony... Gordon... I don't envy you. Because there's a lot of work to do. There is progress, but it's incremental. History never notices that, and the lives that are depending on it don't deserve the wait.

You know we made a promise to half poverty by the year 2015 - a big millennium promise - but we're not even going to make it by 2115. It's not enough to describe Everest, we've got climb it and we've got to bring everyone else along. George, Jacques, Silvio, Gerhardt, Paul, Junichiro - they've all got to come up the hill.

Because this is the big year, 2005. All of you have to double aid, double it's effectiveness, and double trouble for corrupt leaders. The G8 - people look at these meetings and wonder whether they ever achieve anything.

I stood in Cologne, with how many thousands of people. We got that announcement on debt cancellation which now means that three times as many children in Uganda are going to school. Finish what you started in Cologne.”

Why on earth are the leaders of the 'free world' coming to Scotland. I believe it is an act of redemption. After all the injustices perpetrated by Scots on foreign soil, we have an opportunity to welcome others to this land and, in their stay here, literally change the world.

Its unprecedented – world leaders gathering here in Scotland whilst we have Presidency of the EU, presidency of the G8, and a Government willing to put trade justice, debt cancellation and better aid on the agenda. God works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. And He is working!

The UK has already cancelled 100% of the debt owed to it – now we need to use the influence we have to persuade others to do the same, especially our friends across the water. The cynics amongst us, here and elsewhere, would say it will all come to nothing.

Cynicism is a disease of strangled hope. But there is hope. I had the chance to ask Patricia Hewitt, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, what we could do and she said make some noise. Ed Balls, the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, spoke of the building being surrounded by Jubilee 2000 supporters blowing whistles whilst he was on the phone to Germany. He said it was incredibly useful to be able to hold the phone up to the window to let them hear the pressure they were under. These are senior Government figures not just admitting that the wee people can make a difference, but actively encouraging us to do so!

So what can we do?

We hope to put a pile of resources on the website with links to where you can find out more and get involved. You can help run a credit union, volunteer at a Citizens Advice Bureau, give to enable more work to be done, contact your local politicians, Visit www.makepovertyhistory.org and start lobbying world leaders – it worked for the persistent widow.

But what is the Spirit saying to you? Not the dull confusion of condemnation, but the sharp needle of conviction. Perhaps you need to get your own finances in order, get out of debt – seeking help if you need it, give more gladly. Maybe you need to sacrifice some time – to volunteering, letter writing, helping where you know you can. Or perhaps there's a fire in your belly to pray for this nation this year.

This is a God given opportunity. Poverty need not be an inheritance. Let us give, let us act and let us pray. Real and lasting change is possible – to make the compassion of God our legacy.

David McNeish

david_g_mcneish@yahoo.co.uk

Website resources

www.makepovertyhistory.org
www.theafricafund.net

www.debt-on-our-doorstep.com
www.church-poverty.org.uk

www.capitalcreditunion.com

www.theyworkforyou.com
www.parliament.uk
www.scottishparliament.uk

www.cpag.org.uk
www.jrf.org.uk
www.cas.org.uk