

GOD OF THE POOR – THE CALL TO CHARITY AND JUSTICE

God's love for the poor

Luke 16:19-23 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side."

The rich man and Lazarus is one of Jesus's toughest parables. It insists that God's wrath rests on anyone who neglects those who are materially poor, while God loves the poor. It raises some key questions. Are we rich? Who is Lazarus today? What should we do to avoid the rich man's fate?

Imagine if in the UK a child had only a one-in-five chance of living to be 5. Imagine if the average life span was only 50 years. Imagine if one in 20 of us had HIV. Imagine if half of us were undernourished. And we had to live on 15p a day! Sadly, there is a country like that and it's Ethiopia. Elsewhere it's sometimes worse. In Angola people die on average at age 39. In Lesotho one in three people has HIV. In the Democratic Congo, 70% are undernourished. And in the UK – the figures speak for themselves, it's a different world. Look especially at the income difference – about 300 times. As those of us who've been to Mozambique will testify, virtually everyone in the UK is well off in a global comparison (although homeless people who fall through the net can suffer dreadful poverty). That's why I will focus today on poor people in the poorest countries, which are mainly in Africa.

Those sorts of figures are helpful to some of us in understanding poverty, but less so to others. So let's just look at some pictures. Just remember as you watch, Genesis 1 says that all humans have the dignity of being in the image of God, and Romans 5 says that Christ died for them. [Phil Collins as background.]

As Wayne said last week, the burden of poverty in the world can seem so extreme, that one is paralysed. But when we look at God's word, we will realise that we must respond decisively in three ways. To be charitable, to seek justice, and to see poor people as God does. Let me repeat, to be charitable, to seek justice, and to see poor people as God does. These are outlets for the unprecedented compassion to which this church is called.

The call to give charitably

Let's start with charity. The bible is full of encouragement to be charitable. The good wife of Proverbs 31 is commended because "She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy". In Deuteronomy 15, God's people are told "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy." Jesus too calls us to compassionate charity for those neighbours who need it. As we heard last week, the parable of the Good Samaritan defines the neighbour is defined universally to be any suffering person, not just a member of the same country, race or faith. So our charity too must be global.

A great example to us is the early church, full of the Holy Spirit and following Jesus' teaching. This featured voluntary sharing of resources and taking of responsibility for one another's needs (Acts 2:44-45), "All the believers were together and had everything in

common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.” Paul organised a massive collection for the poor members of the church in Jerusalem. He gave two guidelines for individual charity in 2 Corinthians 8 – ‘give all you can’ – be generous and ‘giving is voluntary’ – it has to be your own decision, drawn from the compassion you feel.

I believe Paul’s collection for the Jerusalem church (Romans 15:26-27) can be seen as a model for us of global charity promoting the well-being of humanity. We can do this via supporting Christian development charities, like Iris, Compassion or Tear Fund. Our charity can be in time as well as money as our friends do with the down and outs via Bridge Trust closer to home. Scripture encourages us greatly in charity as Paul tells the rich in 1 Timothy 6:18-19: “Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age” meaning we would be rewarded in heaven for our charity.

You may ask, how can I give to charity when I have nothing left at the end of the month. Perhaps we should listen to John Wesley, who argued that a rich Christian should give away all income except what is needed for “the plain necessities of life”, and some saving for the future. Those at the money management seminar yesterday will recall that careful budgeting can make money go much further – leaving more not just for ourselves but also for the poor.

A bigger barrier we have to overcome is what Ronald Sider calls the “unprecedented material luxuries” of Western societies that too quickly becomes necessities. The car’s too old, we need a new one, the kitchen’s too old, we need a new one. We all too easily get into “spiritual poverty” based on addiction to consumption, thinking more stuff will make us happy, while we neglect charity to the poor. Just like the rich man with Lazarus.

Those who were here last week will remember Sarah reading from James 2:14-17 that words alone are insufficient to express love for God; action for the poor is needed. 1 John 3:16-17 says “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” suggests that those who have the world’s goods and neglect the poor do not have God’s love in them. In other words, if we have no compassion for the poor, it casts doubt on our own salvation. We must be careful.

What’s at the root is a question of heart – is it money or God? Jesus highlights if wealth becomes our idol, we cannot love God “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matthew 6:24). Paul too warns that Christians seeking to get rich endanger their faith (1 Timothy 6:10), “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs”. So giving away part of our income to the poor is a means of our salvation from the “poverty of being” that we who are rich can suffer from “being attached to things of the world, blind to the need for God”. I can witness that I used to be very mean, despite being well paid, and the idea of giving money to church – or much to charity – was anathema. But somehow God softened my heart to start giving 10% of my income away. I’m convinced I would not have become a Christian if that stronghold had not been broken.

The call to seek justice

What I’ve said so far is probably pretty familiar to most of you, and I’m sure many of you are generous in charitable giving, especially, and paradoxically, those who are less well off. But I believe it’s not the only call on us as Christians. We must also be passionate about justice for the poor. The Bible states categorically that God is a God of justice. Psalm 11:7 says “For the

LORD is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face". People tend to focus less on justice than charity, but it's just as important. And injustice is not just a matter of individual rights, it can also be embedded in the system, barring the poor from the resources they need to better themselves.

Think of some real world examples. How just is it that women are tricked into coming to the UK, then sold as slaves in the sex industry? How just is it that someone born in Mozambique has a 50% chance of being undernourished, which wrecks their life chances. A person who is chronically undernourished gets in a vicious circle. Their skills, energy and strength deteriorate, so they ultimately cannot do anything but beg on the streets. How just is it that only 60% of boys and 30% of girls in Mozambique even go to school – so they lack the most basic tools to earn a living? That we impose trade barriers that stop companies in Mozambique trading with us on an equal basis, which could give people a living wage. I could go on.....

God gives us some crucial teaching on justice for the poor that we need to reinterpret for today. Amos 5:24 says "let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" It emphasises the need to strive for individual justice, eliminating a corrupt legal system that was biased in favour of the wealthy. God wants justice for each individual. There's a sound legal system in the UK but what about in poor countries, where the gun or the bribe is often the means of justice? And what about those poorly protected like sex slaves? We must support organisations like Stop the Traffik, campaigning against such slavery – as well as those like Open Doors that plead for the suffering church as it faces injustice.

But justice is more than an individual matter, it's also a question of the system and structures of society, politics and economics. God in the Law of Moses called on the Israelites to act justly, with the aim that they should have no poor among them. A key means to ensure this was the Jubilee (Leviticus 25) for periodic return of land to the family that originally owned it. There was also the Sabbath year every 7 years, (Deuteronomy 15) entailing release of debts, freedom of Hebrew slaves, and land left fallow so the poor could eat. Israelite farmers were called to leave the corner of a field unharvested to let the poor eat (the story of Ruth refers to this) and there was to be no taking of a millstone – essential to make bread. Equally in the New Testament, Paul in his collection for the church in Jerusalem stressed that as in the distribution of manna in Exodus, there should be a form of equality between believers so all had their basic needs met and had a decent living.

What God is doing in these passages is to override unlimited property rights for the rich with his own higher justice, since he is the maker of all things. The provisions gave the poor the opportunity by hard work to earn the basic necessities of life, to have dignity and control their own destinies. God creates a mechanism of what we can call 'structural justice', giving rise to entitlements for the poor, that empower them with means of production, they don't see them just as helpless victims.

We can't translate the Law directly into rules for today. Although it would be great if our mortgages were written off after 7 years, there might be a problem that no one would lend anything! Nor do most of us have millstones in the garage. But when we consider it, the UK does benefit from systems that have a similar beneficial effect, ensuring people have the opportunity to make a living and not descend into dire poverty. These include free education, free healthcare, income support, unemployment benefit. The rule of law protecting our property rights and political stability. Many of these were introduced by people with Christian convictions and we should thank God for them, imperfect as they are.

But what about poor people in Africa? There is very little to give them structural justice. Aid may come in but it often benefits the rich and corrupt officials. The education and healthcare systems are private and often beyond the means of poor people. The global market economy, which should benefit everyone, is rigged in favour of the rich countries who impose trade barriers on poor country exports. Their countries are burdened with debt and often plagued by drought or flood. They lack even adequate roads and other infrastructure. Wars and political instability are endemic.

This is where our Christian conscience can be roused. With suitable understanding from social science, and taking a global view of poverty, we can be instruments for God's structural justice. We can seek to act to improve the system as well as giving to charity and fighting individual cases. Recall that Jesus as the servant of God is prophesied to bring justice to the nations in Isaiah 42. There are also spiritual aspects, as some theologians argue that 'structural injustice' in politics and economics reflects the influence of Satan on 'the world' (Ephesians 2:1-2). And our conscience has to be sharpened by the knowledge that our country is partly responsible for some of the problems, such as trade policy and global warming. What sort of things could we do? We can join campaigning organisations, press our MPs, and direct our charitable donations wisely, for example:

- The "Drop the Debt" campaign, that is supported by the current UK government, aims for the poorest countries to be relieved of the burden of foreign debt, often incurred by their corrupt dictators in the past and which gave the people no benefit. There's a clear link here to the Jubilee.
- The "Make Poverty History" campaign targets among other things trade policies of the rich countries preventing poor country exports, or dumping products to the detriment of local industry. To give one example, sale of subsidised grain from rich countries in Rwanda led to a collapse of local agriculture, and may have helped trigger the genocide. In my view these are the greatest scandal and cause of poverty, they are like the false weights and measures that the prophets condemned.
- We have to take climate change seriously not only for all of humanity's sake but because it disproportionately affects the poor. Much of Bangladesh risks to be submerged when sea levels rise – and the rich world caused the problem.
- And we can direct our charity not only to disaster situations but also to giving people the ability to climb out of poverty. Micro credit, tiny loans, is a key way of helping the poor to set up businesses; in Bangladesh it's only provided to groups of women, who monitor each other and don't waste loans on cigarettes and gambling! Christian charities building infrastructure like wells can direct aid to people directly and avoid government corruption. Sponsoring a child with Compassion means not only preventing hunger but giving them vital education for the future.

Do we see the poor as God does?

I think the last example I gave – sponsoring a child - is an important one. A danger for us when we are being charitable and pursuing justice is to treat the poor as "objects" rather than persons valued in themselves. Or poverty as a purely technical problem. That is not what God wants, as is implicit in 1 Corinthians 13:3 "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." Remember the parable I started with – God ensured Lazarus's name was eternally recorded in Scripture, because God cared, even of the rich man didn't! Let's just look again at the poor people on the pictures and think of them as Jesus would, as people. [Phil Collins again.]

This need to treat the poor as people is not just a spiritual matter, it's also practical development policy – this is exciting stuff! Myers, a Christian Development professional says “as good as transferring resources (by aid)...can be, the process by which they are achieved can rob them of any goodness. A flawed process can make the poor poorer by devaluing their view of themselves and what they have...”. The process worsens “poverty of the mind”, the thought that “I’ll never be able to better myself.”

The school of “transformational development” which has been adopted by charities such as Tear Fund and Compassion argues that unless the poor person, made in God’s image, is treated as a subject in charity or justice – and that the poor person sees the action of God already in their lives - aid can be in vain. Development needs to start from the story of the poor people themselves, so assistance is a form of cooperation using their knowledge and wisdom, leading them to take their own decisions. This is being a servant, as Jesus taught his disciples (Matthew 20:25-8). The leading role can then be played by local churches and locally established charities, who are deeply involved in the community. Similar caring takes place closer to home in the Bridge Trust, with whom members of our church is involved.

Let me add that transformational development also argues for evangelism as an integral part of development, to heal relationships of the poor with God, self (i.e. curing “poverty of the mind”) and neighbours, Development workers need to be peacemakers between the local poor and non-poor who have often been their exploiters. The non-poor need Christ in their lives to lay down their control willingly. Some people may be poor due to fallen laziness and they too need transformed lives as converted Christians to escape from such poverty. Furthermore, those made poor by unbiblical worldviews, like the untouchables in India, need conversion to Christianity to overcome their impact.

Summary – God of the poor

What we have seen is that the Bible focuses strongly, albeit not exclusively, on the material poor as objects of God’s concern. Central to the overall biblical message are forms of sharing so that those poor people who are ‘disabled’ get a generous share of resources (that’s charity) and poor ‘able’ people have productive resources to earn a decent living (that’s justice). These link to equal value of human beings before God, and the role of (rich) humanity as stewards of God’s creation from right back in Genesis 2.

In my view, the Bible requires charitable giving as a way of providing for those who temporarily became poor, whereas provisions of justice should correct the situation in the long term by provision of capital and means to earn a living to them as an entitlement. We as Christians are called to give charitably and seek both individual justice and justice in the structure of economic relations, driven by God’s love and care for the poor. And we must see people as God does. Let me be blunt. God is holding us responsible for maintaining charity and justice. Will we do it?

I’ve made many suggestions for action, but one I leave you with today particularly is sponsoring a child, for example with Compassion. This form of charity not only prevents destitution but gives the child the Christian education they need to make a way in the world – a form of justice - and it can be incredibly personal as you correspond with the young person. Will you consider it?