

Cathedral Eucharist
June 21st 2015
3rd Sunday after Trinity (Poverty Sunday)
I Sam 17.32-49; 2 Cor 6.1-13; Mk 4.35-end
The Revd Canon Bruce Saunders

What a fascinating selection of readings for a Sunday when the Church invites us to think again about the difficult issue of poverty! David and Goliath; St Paul on 'the weapons of righteousness' and Jesus commanding the storm to be still. (He uses the aggressive word 'be muzzled' that you'd use of a mad dog.) You could write your own sermon on the basis of those passages. But we'll come back to them.

'Poverty' is a word that only occurs once in the Gospels, in the story of the poor widow who comes to the Temple and puts into the collection box two small coins worth a penny. And Jesus tells his disciples that she has put in more than those who gave more, because they gave out of their disposable income. Their spare cash. She gave out of her poverty everything she had to live on. The Greek says 'her whole life'.

Jesus' comment suggests that poverty is not some negative thing, a lack of something, to be pitied, but something that has meaning and can even be creative.

St Paul makes the same point when talking about the Christians in Macedonia who, although poor, make a generous donation towards the famine-struck Christians in Jerusalem. *'The abundant joy of the Macedonians and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.'* (2 Cor 8)

And a little later Paul uses the same reversal when talking about Jesus himself who *'though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.'* (2 Cor 8.9)

So in the many Gospel stories about Jesus and poor people, of which he of course was one, (born in a manger, and later, unlike the foxes and the birds of the air, with no home of his own), we should be alert for this elastic, dynamic aspect of what it means to be poor. We may be surprised but we need to understand when we hear Jesus saying in the Sermon on the Mount that the poor are 'blessed'.

I don't think he was recommending poverty! He wasn't saying that being poor is desirable. There have been many attempts to argue that Jesus' remark *'the poor you will have with you always'* means that we must settle for there being an under-class, a caste of have-nots as a fact of social history. What do they call it now? A Precariat. That might have worked in feudal England when the serfs were glad to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table, or in the Downton Abbey days when servants knew their place and were glad to be there. But that's not, of course, what Jesus meant. To write off that part of society who through a variety of circumstances cannot stand on their own feet is not what Jesus or the Christian Gospel intends us to do.

The problem in a world like ours, in a country like ours, in a city like this is not the presence of people who are poor, but the contrast between them and the people who are rich. Recent analysis by the Social Market Foundation, reported in the Independent in March this year, says that the gap between the richest and poorest has dramatically widened in the past decade. The worst-off families are 57% less financially secure than before the recession. They have an average of less than a week's pay set aside and are therefore more often in the red; and younger people now have little chance of becoming home-owners. By contrast, during these years of austerity, the wealthy have become 64% better off.

A few years ago I spent some sabbatical time in New York and San Francisco looking at church-based social outreach projects – day centres, night shelters, food kitchens. As I wiped tables and washed up in a church that provided a hundred lunches a day, I noticed that the people coming to eat there were not only the scruffy street homeless, but women with children, men in suits on their way to

work, people who were coping but only just, right on the poverty line – and a free meal or two during the week made all the difference. ‘Do churches do this in England?’ I was asked. ‘No’, I said confidently, ‘because we have a benefits system – a safety net to protect people from real poverty’. But that situation is, as you know, changing fast. Our Archbishop urges churches to run food banks, to get involved with credit unions. This Cathedral and many parish churches now regularly collect food donations, as we are doing today. On Monday this week I visited the Loaves and Fishes Project run by the Sisters of the Church in St Paul’s who provide food for 150 people on Sundays and the same number during the week. While I was there, local women were arriving with children in pushchairs – for a cup of coffee and a chat, and leaving with a bag of something to help them through the week. The safety net is not as safe as it once was.

Being poor is not glamorous or desirable – for anyone – unless you’ve chosen it freely as a lifestyle for yourself, or are called to it vocationally. The presence of poor people in an affluent society continues to be an affront and a challenge. And that’s why our readings today are oddly appropriate. The churches are among the few social institutions in this country who have not yet been co-opted into mindless support for market capitalism and the rule of money. We are, or should be, one of the Davids standing courageously against the Goliath of personal and corporate self-interest, denouncing it wherever we see it – in our politicians, in our local council, in ourselves. Most of us have plenty of everyday opportunities – at work, in conversation with friends, in our groups and societies, at the bus-stop or in the supermarket – to speak the truth, to challenge the ill-informed assumptions and prejudices that fuel and protect self-interest.

In that great battle, God provides us with what St Paul calls the weapons of righteousness. To fight it, we first have to find a kind of poverty in ourselves – the kind of poverty that Jesus calls blessed, the kind of life that gives itself away, that loses itself, lays itself down for others. Lives marked by ‘purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech’. That kind of poverty becomes paradoxically creative, catalytic: *‘We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.’*

Adjusting our own understanding of what makes you rich or poor is not a substitute for or an easy way out of the social challenge of physical poverty. But it makes a difference. And with God’s help and ours, lives can change. Talk to the young man who sells the Big Issue halfway up Park St and he’ll tell you that a year ago he was sleeping rough in a Bristol carpark. Because of the help he received from people who cared, who saw him not as a pile of rags but as a fellow human being, he now has a home, he’s in love, and with his income from the Big Issue (he’ll tell you proudly that he’s never been on benefits) he’s putting himself through a university course.

The City of Bristol has an honourable record of charitable philanthropy, but if anything is going to change we need less charity and more social justice. Jesus loved poor people and therefore, as we know, so should we. But please remember that in the Christian dictionary ‘love’ is not about how you feel but about how you act. While there are still poor people in this world, in this city, of such overwhelming plenty, we are all impoverished. But we know and have the means to change that.