

Year A, Christ the King, 26 Nov 2023

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24

Ephesians 1: 15-23

Matthew 25: 31-46

On this Sunday, the last in the liturgical year, we celebrate Christ the King. So why do we have this reading about the Last Judgement?

The various commentaries I have perused this last week, and in previous years, are all agreed that the intention is to point unambiguously to God's preference for the poor, as described through the words and actions of Jesus during his ministry. Jesus healed the sick and ministered to the poor and vulnerable. But Jesus also challenged his society about the injustices and suffering of so many people, that led to so many being held in grinding poverty.

I am sure we all recall Jesus' first words in his home synagogue, where he quoted from Isaiah chapter 61:

“The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, ³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”

As followers of the way of Jesus we are called to care for those in need; those who are vulnerable and are less able; those who for whatever reason are unable to flourish and experience the joys of life. All these people are made in God's image, and are loved and cherished by God. Many will live struggling with poverty, not through any choice of their own, but based on accident of birth, or because our systems and structures, our welfare payments and in-

employment benefits are insufficient to enable people to lift themselves out of poverty. The stress of trying to make financial ends meet each and every day, of not spiralling into debt, of choosing between heating or eating, is often so overwhelming that self-fulfilment, personal development and growth is not on their agenda. Many of these people feel stripped of their dignity.

In 2022 a book called 'Dignity, Agency, Power: Stories, Prayers and Reflections from 40 years of Church Action on Poverty'ⁱ was published. It talks about the work being done to build a movement in which people and communities can reclaim that dignity, agency and power that poverty steals from them. The book includes stories of people's experiences and struggles against poverty but also inspiring stories of hope, transformation, and challenging injustice. I recommend it to you.

A book I read as part of my training for ordination was by Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, called *A Theology of Liberation*ⁱⁱ. He was a Dominican priest with a parish in Lima, Peru, where he served the poor for fifty years, but was also a professor of Theology at Notre Dame University in the USA. He argues that poverty is not accidental, the major disparities between rich and poor result from the economic policies and political strategies of nations and the strategies of large corporate organisations. He said that many people are poor because of the choices other people, those in a role with agency and power, have made. He acknowledges some are poor because of the choices they have made. It is Gutiérrez who first coined the phrase, 'preferential option for the poor'. It describes God's preference and informs us that we too are to have the same approach. Of course, Gutiérrez wasn't the first person to identify and explore this preference. We only have to look at the prophets such as Amos, and in other Hebrew Scripture such as Psalm 146 and Proverbs (31:8) to see that it is in fact an acknowledged aspect of God's care for humanity from even before the incarnation. Paul's letter to the Galatians (2:10) also states that the apostolic leaders in Jerusalem

asked him to remember the poor. Paul spent considerable effort raising funds for famine relief for the people in Jerusalem. In the nascent Christian community, Luke describes in the Book of Acts the important daily task of distributing food to widows.

Of course, you don't need to be Christian to care for the poor, there are secular philanthropists who focus on such care. So, what about those of us seeking to faithfully follow the ways of Jesus?

Should we care for the poor because we may be treated as a sheep, not a goat at the last judgement?

Should we care for the poor because we are guilty about our relative wealth, or because politically or perhaps theologically we want to reject private property and live a pared down ascetic life?

No, I hope we can find ways to serve the poor because we love the Lord our God and part of our response to God's love for us is to serve God. We can do this by our attitude towards and active care for the poor. And, I know from my time working for Bethany Christian Trust, the spiritual rewards for those working on the front line was a privilege to witness on occasions, alongside the awe for the effort many of those dedicated staff made that was costly in other ways.

I found a quote by Mother Theresa of Calcutta, that made me stop and think. 'Only in heaven will we understand how much we owe the poor for helping us to love God like we should.'

I hope we all can find or have found our own ways to help the poor; whether it be helping out directly or indirectly with the Bethany care van, with supporting the Peeblesshire Youth Trust Christmas Hamper appeal, with supporting aid agencies at home and overseas seeking to alleviate the worst levels of poverty, or in a myriad of other ways. Some Christians, including those working for agencies such as Church Action on Poverty and Christian Aid, try to influence political and governmental policies and structures; seeking to tackle the structural

issues that cause so much of the suffering caused by poverty, whilst also alleviating the suffering the structures of our world create.

One wise person once said to me that if we are not careful, we can get beyond compassion fatigue because we start to become judgemental and then we start to resent God's love of justice and care for the poor, and in so doing harden our hearts and find we have distanced ourselves from God. It is always us who moves away from God, God never moves away from us. Judgement belongs solely to God, and I am sure God's judgement has a full measure of redemption. I cannot conceive of a God of love that does not wish redemption for all of God's children, even those that may be called goats.

Our response to God's love for us and our desire to follow the way of Christ the King is to find our own ways to 'bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.' What may be your way in the new liturgical year?

ⁱ Dignity, Agency Power, Stories, Prayers and reflections from 40 years of Church Action on Poverty, published by Wild Goose Publications, ISBN 978-1-80432-001-3

ⁱⁱ A Theology of Liberation, Fr. G Gutiérrez, SCM Press, 1996 ISBN 978-0-33402-356-2