

Impossible Situations



Poverty – March 13th 2024

Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

There are a few different types of ‘poverty’ that are referred to in the bible. Jesus refers to both the ‘poor,’ and the ‘poor in spirit.’ One doesn’t have to look very hard to find what Jesus has to say about the poor. Luke’s beatitudes are emphatic, it’s the poor that will inherit the Kingdom, it is the hungry that will be filled and unlike Matthew’s beatitudes, Luke includes the woes, where it’s the rich who have already received their consolation in this life. To emphasise the point Luke’s gospel is the only one to tell the story of the rich man and the destitute Lazarus, whose roles are reversed in the Kingdom (Luke 16:19-31)

The ‘poor in spirit,’ is open to interpretation. Matthew’s beatitudes say it is the ‘poor in spirit,’ that will inherit the Kingdom. Many suggest this is less to do with money and more to do with humility before God and the ‘poor in spirit’ are those who are rich in faith. St Augustine had this to say about Jesus, “though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that by his poverty, we may become rich.” To my mind Augustine’s reference about poverty, is not talking about money

These reflections are entitled ‘impossible situations,’ and to my mind the impossible situation is not necessarily poverty itself, awful though that is, it is where there are no means to be able to escape that situation and my first thoughts turn to refugee camps, wherever they might be, here or abroad. Many of us, me included, assuage our consciences by giving to reputable charities that look to alleviate poverty wherever they find it. However, there is an argument that says ‘all charity does is imprison people in their current situation.’ There’s an element of truth in that, blanket giving to alleviate need might prove to be a disincentive for those to change their situation, but does that mean we should not give?

Jesus cared passionately about the poor and downtrodden, always demonstrating his compassion in tangible ways, giving sight to the blind, touching the leper and healing the sick. Should specific acts like these be the

blueprint for our actions in this community, and rather than giving to large blanket charities, should we instead, or as well as, be giving to charities that are specific in the needs that they target?

In the UK as well as other nations, we don't just have poverty, we also have the poverty trap, where anyone trying to earn a little more sees no net gain because state benefits are correspondingly reduced. This truly is an impossible situation, where one applauds the endeavour, but can equally understand the disincentive. Also, how should we in Haslemere reflect on Jesus' comment about the camel and the eye of the needle (Matthew 19:24) or his advice to the rich student, to sell all his possessions and give to the poor (Mark 10:17-22)? Impossible situations have no easy answers.

What about those who are 'poor in spirit?' I'm sure we might all have witnessed those who are living in relative poverty, who are anything but, poor in spirit. For me I saw this in Tanzania in village after village, where possessions are few, food and water sometimes tenuous, but where we encountered laughter, joy and love. If anyone was going to inherit the Kingdom of God, these villagers and particularly their children would be first in the queue.

Lent is a time when we follow Jesus into the wilderness and deny ourselves. As mentioned in a recent sermon, this denial has little to do with chocolate or alcohol, but more with surrendering of our whole selves to the one who loves us more than we understand. If we surrender and acknowledge all our weaknesses and sins, both past and present, might we achieve the humility of the 'poor in spirit?'

Looking back at Augustine's quote about Jesus, who was rich and for us became poor, and through his poverty allowed us to become rich, isn't that the ultimate act of humility? Christ's sacrifice before he ever got to the cross, was to give of himself to us, surely no greater love than to give up the divine and assume the poverty of fallen humanity?

Like the widow, who gave all that she had out of poverty, so Christ gave of himself through our fallen poverty. It's worth remembering perhaps that humanity impoverished itself from God, but God so loved the world that he gave his only son (John 3:16). Poverty, then can come in many guises, but however and wherever we find it, surely our challenge is how we react to it?

Rev'd Justin