

Poverty

From today's second lesson:

You know the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ: he was rich, but yet for your sake became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich.

The Church has always had a somewhat ambivalent relationship with poverty. In the Gospels Jesus is presented as a wandering preacher without home or possessions. *Foxes have their holes, birds have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head.* Furthermore, Jesus' teaching is highly critical of the rich. After his encounter with the rich young man Jesus says, *It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.* It appears at first glance from the Gospels that Jesus is advocating poverty as a virtue and it is interesting that monks and nuns in most religious orders take a vow of poverty as they enter the religious life.

However, on the other hand we all know what a terrible thing poverty is. It is not something to be romantic about. It diminishes human beings by malnourishing the body and crushing the spirit. Poverty is an enemy of human flourishing and as such it is a scourge to be eradicated. And very slowly it is being eradicated. World poverty between the year 2000 and 2013 was halved. But there is still a long way to go to rid the world of poverty.

So, what do Christians mean when we talk approvingly of poverty. We clearly are not commending the terrible things that come with impoverishment. We get to the heart of it when we look at the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. That sermon of Jesus starts with the Beatitudes and the first beatitude is 'Blessed are the poor *in spirit*, theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven'.

Being poor in spirit is different from being poor in the sense of being ground down by poverty. It is about a state of mind, about a way of living your life. Being poor in spirit is how Jesus is and how he lived his life. From what we can see in the Gospels Jesus was certainly not impoverished: he seems to have moved from dinner party to dinner party to such an extent that the Pharisees accuse him and his disciples of not being ascetic enough. But Jesus was poor in spirit.

Being poor in spirit is about humility, generosity and self-sacrifice. All these qualities are hallmarks of Jesus' character, the way he related to others and the way he lived his life. We never see Jesus being self-centred or selfish. He seems to empty himself to be at the service of God and others.

This is clearly outlined for us in the four Gospels, where in almost biographical detail the life of Jesus is described as an exemplar for us all to follow. 'The Gospels are saying to us: 'here is a human life in which we see how God wants us to live. We don't need laws and regulations. We just need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and learn the imitation of Christ in our own lives'. In practical terms that involves us becoming more humble, generous and self-sacrificial. It also affects our life style – how can we be more frugal and less wasteful. Do we need to have so many things, so many consumables? Can we be less acquisitive and live more simply? Can we live lives which are less attached to possessions and our comforts?

But Paul reminds us that Jesus takes being poor in spirit to a new level. Jesus not only sits lightly to possessions, to status and to his own comfort; he also sits lightly to his own life. The life of being poor in spirit, a life of godly living brought him into conflict with those whose values were

different. He could so easily have backed down and returned to a quiet life in Nazareth from whence he came. But he didn't. He accepted death as the consequence of living according to grace and truth. Paul puts it memorably in the second chapter of his Letter to the Philippians:

Take to heart among yourselves what you find in Christ Jesus: He was in the form of God, yet he laid no claim to equality with God, but made himself nothing assuming the form of a servant. Bearing the human likeness, sharing the human lot, he humbled himself and was obedient even to the point of death, death on a cross.

This is what Paul is getting at in today's second lesson. It is Jesus' self-emptying on the cross and his being raised in the resurrection by God which opens to us new life and a new richness of being. It is in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that we are clearly shown the means of grace and the hope of glory.

You know the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ: he was rich, but yet for your sake became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich.