

Third Sunday of the Year C (2019) – Good News to the Poor

In 2016 when I last related today's Gospel to the situation in our country there were an estimated 15 million people living below the poverty line in Britain. Out of a population of some 65 million that was a significant percentage. Since then the situation has worsened. Rough sleepers are more evident on our city streets - they are not there by choice, or inexcusably. Food banks have become an established social provision in this country.

Far from easing the situation, several policies adopted by our national Government in recent years have actually worsened it. A number of benefit changes in the last two years impact on families, not just on individuals. For example: an overall benefit cap has impacted over 40,000 single parent households. There are also a number of concerns connected with the roll out of Universal Credit.

The dominant narrative in mainstream media seems to be about so-called 'benefit cheats' but the reality is that most families in poverty have at least one person in the household who is working.

In today's Gospel Jesus says: *I have come to bring Good News to the poor; to proclaim liberty to captives; to the blind new sight; to set the downtrodden free.*

At one time that familiar text would have been applied in an entirely individual, personal way with the focus on spiritual matters. So the 'Good News' would be that God loves us, sinners though we are, and that in the person of Jesus Christ we can see this clearly. By co-operating with God's grace each of us can be set free from the chains of sin. Jesus comes to us so that our lives will become upright and virtuous and so that we will enjoy inner peace, and eternal life in heaven.

That interpretation is still valid, of course. But we have become more aware in recent years that sin is not only private and personal. We are social creatures and there can be sinful structures in our society that can prevent us from realising our potential as human beings. Things can be so set up that they militate against our welfare both as individuals and as groups.

So as well as striving for our personal good we should give attention also to the 'Common Good' - the welfare of all. We must do all we can to ensure that every person and all peoples of the world enjoy their due measure of independence, equality of opportunity, and a fair share in the goods of the earth. The Kingdom of God – a Kingdom of Justice, Love and Peace - is to be built up in human society now – and well as experienced to the full in the hereafter.

These sentiments, these principles, are rooted in the Gospel. They have been expressed in various practical ways in the life of the church over the centuries and they are at the heart of what is now called **Catholic Social Doctrine**. These teachings call us to action for the sake of the poor, the chained, and the downtrodden - wherever they may be and whatever is the cause of their distress.

[cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, #67; Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, #34; Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, #63-75, Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, #90; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of Social Doctrine*, #250]

At our Baptism we are each called to share in the mission of Christ *to bring good news to the poor*. In our country today that means we have several practical responsibilities:

We should urge the widespread adoption of a **Living Wage** - that is, a rate of remuneration for work that is not an arbitrary sum, or one derived simply by extrapolating from national averages of any kind. A Living Wage is the payment of an amount which is adequate to provide the recipient with food, shelter, health care, and other necessities of life.

We should challenge **economic policies** which sustain - or risk increasing - impoverishment among our people.

We should denounce any assertions that lay the **blame** for personal poverty on the sufferers rather than on those whose greed is the underlying cause of it.

We should engage in the national effort to establish **food banks** in every area, and to support them where they have been set up.

Actually, parishioners in our three churches are to be commended for their engagement and their generosity towards the local food banks - and to the SVP Society which provides for many in need in our own locality, and also more widely through the SVP Support Centre on York Road.

There are many other church communities in our Diocese which are undertaking poverty relief work of one sort or another, which is admirable. But there is little evidence of discussion or action about the **underlying causes** of the situations and policy decisions that give rise to family poverty.

That is why we have received a request, an invitation, from the Leeds Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission to be engaged in a parish-based programme of 5 workshops to reflect more deeply on aspects of family poverty and its various causes.

This programme has been devised in conjunction with the agency *Church Action on Poverty* with funding from the *Society of the Holy Child Jesus*. The workshops are interactive in character with resource materials including short videos, Power Point presentations, and case studies, as well as background material to take away and read in between meetings. Subject matter includes such subjects as Benefits Sanctions, Universal Credit, Zero Hours Contracts, Affordable Child Care, Affordable Housing, the Digital Divide, and the Gig Economy.

The workshops will explore questions like these:

Do you know of people living in poverty in your area?

Do you know the reasons why people are having to live in poverty?

What is impact of poverty on their lives?

What does Church Teaching tell us about this situation?

When does helping people in poverty become propping up an unjust system?

I shall be putting this proposal to our Parish Council at its next meeting to be convened on January 30th. If anyone would be interested in taking part in such a workshop sometime this year please let us know.

Jesus says: *If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear* (Matt 11:15).
