

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

Today's Gospel carries on from last week the story of Jesus' announcement of his Mission. It continues that tale to describe the sequence of reactions to his preaching as the challenge of his message became more apparent. That outcome still happens today.

In 2016 when I last related the Gospel narrative 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 - set up and run by volunteers.

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 (UC). For example, council workers in one large city noted a surge in referrals to food banks: in June last year, before UC, 5% of people on an estate were referred to food banks - that has now risen to 29%. In the same city 41% of children are in poverty.

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.

It should be noted that the bureaucratic struggle simply to claim benefits is a big problem. 65% of the most vulnerable people who come to the cited city's Council for help don't have access to a computer, smart phone, or an email address. Besides possessing such an item there is also the computer literacy that is required to use them. There still many people who do not have such skills.

Last autumn the UN's Rapporteur on Poverty, Philip Alston, undertook a tour of our country. His eventual report was damning: he wrote that 'the Government had inflicted 'great misery' on its people with 'punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous' austerity policies. These assertions were rejected by Government spokespersons - but that they have been made is surely challenging to a nation with the seventh strongest economy in the world.

In the Gospel Jesus announces: *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 by a homilist 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, 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, whoever they may be, and whatever is the cause of their distress.*

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:

e.g.(1) 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.

e.g.(2) We should engage in the national effort to establish **food banks** in every area, and to support them where they have been set up.

e.g.(3) We should denounce any assertions that lay the **blame** for personal poverty on the sufferers rather than on those whose greed is probably the underlying cause of it.

e.g.(4) We should challenge **economic policies** which sustain - or risk increasing - impoverishment among our people.

It was the experience of Jesus that when the full import of his teaching was realised, that is, his pointing to the injustices being perpetrated and perpetuated in the social order of his day, his admirers began to be replaced by his critics, his teaching opposed, and efforts to prevent his activity gathered momentum. Today's Gospel summarises that sorry development which led, inexorably, to his arrest and death on the Cross: a fate suffered by all the Prophets of God, from ancient times to the present day.

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 splendid.

But there is not so much evidence of discussion or action about the **underlying causes** of family poverty, of the policy decisions that give rise to it, and of how best to respond effectively to today's unjust situations.

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* and is being helped 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 put this proposal to our Parish Council at meeting last week where it met with full support. We could hold these workshops after Easter, when there will be further publicity. In the meantime, if anyone would be interested in taking part in them please let us know by phone, text, email or in person.

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

*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.