

## Good News For the Poor

The words of the prophet Isaiah and of Jesus:

‘He has sent me to announce good news to the poor’ (Luke 4.18, Isaiah 61.1).

Every story has a beginning, a middle and an end, and the Bible, which tells the story of the human race, is no exception. In the beginning, there was a garden which God entrusted to human beings in the persons of Adam and Eve. From the beginning, it’s clear that human beings were meant for each other; ‘It’s not good’ said God, ‘that Adam (that’s the Hebrew word for ‘human being’) should be alone’. And why? Because humans are made in the image of the God who is, in the mystery of his own being, a communion of love.

So to say ‘There is no such thing as society’ flies in the face of our God-given DNA. It would be more true to say, in the light of the Bible’s story, that there is no such thing as an ‘individual’.

Of course, we believe each person is unique and God loves them as such, and that each person needs their ‘space’, their privacy. But we were meant for relationships, for communion, for society.

So there is something inescapably public about the Church which, for all its many failures and scandals, is meant to model what a human society is supposed to be. The first certain word for ‘church’ that we know of is the Greek word *ecclesia*, which meant ‘public assembly’. From day one, the Church has belonged to the public square - which is where the Churches Together Report should be,

*Ludlow Under Continuing Pressure. Hope in Troubled Times?*

This is a report not just for the churches, and certainly not (primarily) about the churches; it’s about our community, the challenges which lie ahead, especially those caused by drastic cuts in public funding, and the fundamental questions we face as human beings – some of those questions prompted by our God-given DNA.

The biblical story moved on from a garden. Adam ‘fell’, or, as we might now say in the light of evolution, we human beings are a long way from the destiny intended for us by God. So we need the law; we need prophets – as the Bible shows.

What the law and the prophets say in the Bible can come as a shock. For example, according to the Bible, poverty is caused by rich people. In the time of the prophet Amos, the reason why the poor were being sold for a pair of shoes was because the rich were collecting houses and fields rather like children in my childhood collected stamps. According to the book of Leviticus, the likely reason why a hired labourer's children might go to be hungry was because their father's employer held back his wages until the next day.

*Is poverty the creation of the rich? If we may dare to dissent from the Bible, perhaps not always. Yet a major reason why there are so many families in Britain today crammed into intolerably overcrowded living-quarters, or on endless housing waiting lists, is because successive governments have looked after the more well-to-do, and because private landlords often collect properties like stamps. (God is the best judge of whether they are offering a public service or building a private property empire).*

Hunger, too, is stalking this country again, as many, many foodbanks – including Ludlow's – show only too well; the poorest are suffering most in the wake of the irresponsibility of obscenely wealthy people in the finance industry. More poverty created by rich people?

Somehow we humans have turned the God who in the beginning entrusted the garden to everyone into a god of private property and private finance. It's not difficult to identify a society's gods: they are those things on which it has set its heart (Luther's definition of an 'idol'). We hear a lot about British values, but it seems that what we value most of all is private money and private property.

You can identify a society's gods in another way. They are those things – or people – who are above criticism and questioning. So you will see that 'the hard-working taxpayer' has achieved in our day a status almost divine.

But false gods exact a heavy price. If we deny society, society will sooner or later unravel – as it is beginning to do. On Radio 4 the other day I heard a woman who had suffered a serious physical disability for a number of years tell her interviewer that it is only in the last year or two that people have begun to point an accusing finger at her in public, saying 'People like you are living off the rest of us'.

No wonder a Messiah – a Deliverer- was and is needed who will preach good news to the poor. And according to two of our four gospels, that is what Jesus did – preached good news to the poor.

But how could the poor believe the good news unless they saw it as well as heard it? How could they believe it unless they saw it in Someone who practised what he preached, recognizing the humanity of people society had demonized or ostracized, feeding the hungry crowds and putting the broken, the bruised and the marginalized back on their feet again?

Such was the ministry of the One whom they came to acknowledge as God's anointed, *the* Son of God in a way that no-one had ever been before or has been since.

How will people believe a gospel for the poor unless they see it as well as hear it? There was – there is – no such thing as a disembodied gospel. 'The Word was made flesh'. That is the cornerstone of Christian faith. How will 'prisoners' (also mentioned in the Messianic manifesto) hear the good news if they are cooped up in their cells for 23 hours a day – though happily now with a book or two to read, thanks to the intervention of the law. How will teenagers in Ludlow believe if churches are silent as youth services implode, and, across the world, carbon emissions continue to rise?

There is no such thing as a disembodied gospel. Those politicians are profoundly mistaken who advise the Church to stick to knitting or to 'spiritual' matters. 'The Word was made flesh', and his bias to the poor was clear for all to see.

Where does all this leave the rich? Does good news for the poor mean bad news for the rich? The Bible – Old and New Testaments alike – has some harsh things to say about rich people. But Christianity is not Marxism. God loves rich and poor alike. Jesus the Messiah called rich and poor alike to repentance, (though the story of Zaccheus suggests that the rich had more to lose – or, rather, to give away – than the poor).

Christianity isn't Marxism. It isn't the politics of envy. The gospel of good news for the poor doesn't derive from modern creeds like socialism, but from

that grand old biblical word 'righteousness': shaping human society according to the will of God.

This is why there appears, in the middle section of the biblical story, a strange community called the *ecclesia* –the Church. There it was in Jerusalem, seeking to live out age-long dreams of community and friendship: they held 'all things in common'. It was *not* an early misguided experiment, as some have suggested, still less was it communism as the 20<sup>th</sup> century knew and suffered it. It was simply a society in which no-one was left in poverty.

The Church spread out from Jerusalem, but its embodied Gospel continued in St Paul's international famine relief project. To a church dragging its feet over this project, he wrote, (citing God's provision of manna in the wilderness):

'It's a question of equality..... "those who gathered more (manna) did not have too much, and those who gathered less did not have too little"'.

That's a stark contrast with most countries today, including our own. (When Jesus said 'To the person who has shall be given, and from the one who has not, shall be taken away even what he has', he was not, I think, talking about economics.

So an embodied Gospel for the poor – in the public square – is very much what the Church is about. A privatized Church, like a privatized Christian faith would be a contradiction in terms.

Even at the end of the biblical story, there is a picture of a public square – a city. The Bible looks forward at the End, not just to a new heaven, but also to a new earth. Whenever and however Christ 'comes' again, (and that might not be a supernatural event in the way we used to think), he will be the same Lord Jesus who announced good news to the poor at Nazareth.

So in the light of the biblical story about us all, let's not privatize 'repentance', the great theme of John the Baptist. Let's not reduce it to a prayer of confession in Advent, a new year's resolution or two, and giving up chocolate for Lent. 'Repentance' means change: change of heart, change of life, change of direction, and it applies as much to nations as to individuals, as Jesus' own ministry showed:

‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if only you had known the things that make for your peace’.

In our day, in our country, in Ludlow, the *ecclesia* must not vacate the public square. We are not called to preach by megaphone, hurling biblical texts like custard pies at unsuspecting passers-by, but to embody good news for the poor, so that people see it even before they hear it.

In Ludlow there is much to be done, and in the future there will be even more. Shropshire Council, by their drastic financial cutbacks, are taking us into strange, new places. Whether that remains unalterable and inevitable will depend in part on whether our governments will continue to regard taxpayers, especially the more well-off, as a protected species. It will depend on whether as a country we think a society with a healthy, efficient public sector, and which looks after its poorest and most vulnerable people is a society worth paying taxes for.

According to the story the Bible tells, there is no such creature as a privatized human being. God intended us for each other; we are all in this life together.

The Gospel of John, which we have heard this morning, as often ‘ploughs his own furrow’, though he draws out what the other gospels imply. Unlike them, he doesn’t explicitly attribute to John the Baptist the theme of repentance. Instead, John was a witness; he simply pointed to Jesus:

‘Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’.

And *that* is our hope in troubled times.

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Advent, 2014