

*God is on the side of the poor, and so should we be*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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*Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17; Mark 7:24-37*

Here is a story for you ...

Once upon a time there were two villages in the land of kind and discerning King. The King's advisors tell him that he needed to do something to encourage the citizens of his land to work harder. After all, the economic prosperity of the whole land depended on it. So the King decides he will richly reward village that builds the best community. The villagers happily begin the task. They make decisions, construct and build, and after 5 years the King, with all his advisors, goes to have a look. At the first village he has finds a group of people who have done an amazing job. They had diverted the river water into the little village and that had enabled them to create wealth and prosperity. The village was well kept and orderly. There were well built roads, a school and a health clinic. The children were well fed, polite and clean. Everyone wore lovely clean clothes made of beautiful fabrics. The security around the village was impressive. There were high walls, guards and gates. Everyone was safe and happy.

The King and his advisors went to the next village. There it was completely different. The roads were made of dirt, the children were grubby and dirty and the people had a weary and worn out look in their eyes. Their clothes were tattered and threadbare. These people could not get water from the river so the women and children had to walk many miles every day to collect water in buckets for the villagers needs. The men felt terrible that they had not been able to take care of their village and they were full despair and hopelessness. The place was falling apart.

The King and his advisors went back to the palace to make the decision. Who would win? Who do you think should win? Well the King made his decision. He chose to richly reward the second village. His advisors were horrified. They went ballistic. They said, "how can we encourage hard work if you reward those lazy slob for failing?"—and they all threw their hands up in disgust and walked out.

Do you think the King got it wrong? What would you have done? According to all the obvious standards it seems obvious he made the wrong choice. What a crazy thing to do. What a crazy way to go about building a kingdom.

Well, God is like that crazy King. He is on the side of the poor, the oppressed and the downtrodden. Despite all evidence to the contrary, God chooses the poor. Catholic Social teaching has a phrase for describing God's attitude to the poor. They say God has a "preferential option for the poor" and they get that perspective straight out of the bible. Some of you may have heard of Jim Wallis – not the guy that heads up the Australian Christian Lobby – but the American theologian, social activist and founder of the Sojourners community. He tells this story:

*"When we were seminarians, the early Sojourners community decided to do an experiment. We cut out of an old Bible every single reference to the poor, to poverty, to justice. After snipping out more than 2,000 verses, we were left with a Bible full of holes that was literally falling apart in our hands".* And the major theme of those verses is that God is on the side of the poor.

Let me just tell you a few. In Deuteronomy 7.7-8 it is explained why God chose the Israelites. It was not because they were numerous and wealthy. It was because they were oppressed and enslaved and he was faithful God and compassionate God. In Sirach 4.5 the warning is *'Do not reject a supplicant in distress, or turn your face away from the poor. Do not avert your eye from the needy, and give no reason to curse you; for if in bitterness of soul some should curse you, their creator will hear their prayer'*. God listens to the cry of those oppressed. In Luke chapter 6, we have of course the beatitudes, *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of heaven*. In all our readings today there are verses and stories about this preferential option God has for the poor.

Our first reading was from the Book of Proverbs and it has some valuable information about poverty and riches and about God's attitude to the poor. Firstly, wealth is put in its place. Verse 1 says that a good name is to be a priority. If we look around at our society, that seems to be a very counter-cultural saying. Our whole culture tells us that the priority is wealth creation and the making of money. We are fascinated by the life-styles of millionaires and we all want to win the lottery. The advice to choose a good name over riches seems antiquated and pointless. But try telling that to Julia Gillard, who although she has been by all accounts a decent Prime Minister and now has a very nice retirement package she now has a name that it seems will forever be tarnished by the way in which she took office and what she had to do to form a minority government. In the end it is not the money we have, the projects we have completed, the goals we have reached that matter. It is how we have treated others along the way. It is through our interactions with others and our integrity that a good name is created and sustained. With a good name there is so much more that can be accomplished. The writers of the book of Proverbs knew that if you lost your good name it was a hard and sometimes impossible road to get it back.

Our Proverbs reading goes on to talk about what virtues should characterize the way the wealthy should treat the poor. The virtues are justice and generosity. One of the major problems for those who are poor is that they end up in a position of powerlessness. They are often oppressed further because they cannot protect themselves from situations and people that would further disempower them. In the Philippines the indigenous people are called the Agtar. They are nomadic forest dwellers and their home is being systematically destroyed by illegal logging. Illegal logging that provides cheap timber for furniture factories in China, furniture we buy cheaply with our strong Aussie dollar. The Agtar say "We don't want money. We don't want things that are worth nothing. We want our home". The story of the Agtar is being repeated all over the world. It is being repeated with the billions of other species and creatures with which we share this planet. Elephants in Africa are being pushed to the edge of extinction through illegal poaching, all so the emerging rich in Asia can have ivory chopsticks. The list goes on.

But proverbs have a warning. *"Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils the life of those who despoil them"*. God is on the side of the poor. I don't know about you but I find this a really sobering statement. The Lord pleads the cause of the poor. Doesn't that make you sit up and take notice? When we are all standing there before God and he is sorting us all out then the excuses about economic prosperity are not going to cut much ice if in the process the most needy have been treated unjustly. If the poor have been oppressed and robbed, then that is what is going to get God's attention.

I like reading legal thrillers. There is sometimes an issue where the judge is biased and uses their power to try and manipulate the jury one way or the other. Both sides know this is a real problem. It is great for the side the judge is favouring but a complete disaster for the other

one. Well when it comes to God he is the one on the side of the poor. But he is also the ruler, judge and jury. God is a presiding judge who is clearly biased.

If we look to Jesus, who reveals the nature of God to us, we find that God's bias for the poor is clearly shown. In our gospel reading today we have the healing of the Syrophenician woman and the deaf mute, two people who were ritually and socially unclean and unacceptable according to the religious authorities. Initially Jesus is reluctant to help the woman, possibly because he saw his ministry as being primarily focused on the Jews. However through further conversation he is convinced that she is part of God's great plan and she is healed. All through the Gospels Jesus is available to the poorest and the most oppressed – to talk, to comfort, to encourage, to heal and liberate. He too has a preference for the poor. In fact he identifies with them in a profound and deeply connected way. In one of his most confronting passages in the Gospel of Matthew he tells the parable of the sheep and the goats. The punch line is that Jesus is actually to be found in the poor and oppressed. When we either neglect or help the poor we are doing that exact thing to Jesus. St Augustine puts it this way: *Christ is at once rich and poor: as God, rich; as a human person, poor. Truly, that Man rose to heaven already rich, and now sits at the right hand of the Father, but here, among us, he still suffers hunger, thirst and nakedness: here he is poor and is in the poor.*

Jesus made it his business to teach his followers what true religion was about. It was not about correct worship, knowing the scriptures, having the right doctrine or the right clothing. It was not proving your worthiness by how well you went by the book or how well you looked. It was whether you loved others in the same way Jesus loved. It was whether you had his compassion, mercy and generosity.

In the letter from James we hear again about God's preference for the poor. Verse 5 says, *"Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him"*. But we also hear what our response should be to the poor. James states clearly that is not about judging or showing preferences. Rather it is love and mercy. The purpose of James letter is to say that our faithfulness, our love and commitment to our Lord is shown in our behaviour to others. The proof is in the pudding as the saying goes. Our acts of love and mercy will not save us but they do reveal how fair dinkum we are about our faith. They are also an indication of how 'healthy' our faith really is. As James says, faith without works is dead. If our faith is dead in that way then somewhere, somehow, we have become disconnected from the living stream of God's love. Somehow we have lost what we have gained.

If our acts of love and mercy come out of our connection and relationship to God then our prayer life is the first priority. I cannot emphasize this enough. There is a direct connection between the depth and quality of our relationship with God and our attitudes and actions. I heard Frederica Matthews-Green, an orthodox theologian, speak on Thursday night. She said many good and interesting things but the best thing she said was right at the beginning - the most important thing is our relationship with God. This is one reason that our mission statement here is that we are in the process of 'connecting the disconnected into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ'. As Christians we come to God through Christ Jesus, the divine one made human amongst us and for us. It is through this relationship that we will have a heart for the poor just as God does. (e.g. The Cross)

The care and love of others most in need is not an optional extra. It is a fundamental part of God's Kingdom. It must be a fundamental part of our faith and our walk with Jesus. Without it our faith is dead and is meaningless. Without acts of compassion, justice and mercy, the secular world is right to point and condemn. James says it very bluntly, *"If a brother or sister*

*is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?"* Like God and Jesus, choose to be on the side of the poor and then do something. Words are empty. Only acts of love and mercy change anything.