

Good News to the Poor

- serving and learning from those in greatest need

JESUS AND JUBILEE

Nazareth manifesto

'And he came to Nazareth ... and he came to the synagogue ... and he stood up to read ... "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." ... and he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."' (Luke 4:16-21)

Luke marks the opening of Jesus' public ministry with the stunning moment when he reads the words from Isaiah 61:1-2 in his home synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus sees these words as setting the scene for his work; he is to be the fulfillment of them. The Spirit marks him out as the Messiah [lit. 'anointed one'], the eschatological prophet who is to fulfil both Scripture and the hopes of God's people; and it is all beginning to happen, 'Today ...'

Notice that the essential hallmarks are: 'preaching good news to the poor' and performing powerful works to meet practical needs.

A key to this passage is the phrase, 'to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord'. This is a clear and direct reference to the 'year of Jubilee'; the year of liberation within the Hebrew community. Understanding this is essential to interpreting Jesus' words and actions.

Sounding the *shofar*

In Leviticus 25 (vv8-17) God declares that within Israel, every 50 years, there is to be a year of freedom, rest, release and liberty. It was called 'Jubilee' from the Hebrew word for 'ram'; the sounding of the 'ram's horn', the *shofar*, heralded the commencement of the year. As its haunting tones proclaimed 'the acceptable year of the Lord', four things were to happen:

- Rest for the soil;
- Remission of debt;
- Release of slaves;
- Return of property.

This climatic year of Jubilee, which a Jew could usually only hope to experience once in a lifetime, was built upon cycles of rest within the covenant lifestyle:



- **Sabbath day:** rest every seven days;
- **Sabbatical year:** rest every seven years (soil, debt, slaves);
- **Jubilee year:** restoration every 50 years (7x7 years).

Jubilee is one of the most radical ideas in the Bible; so radical that some doubt if it was ever really practiced! But it proclaims some vital divine principles about property and poverty; and it sets the vital environment to Jesus' work:

- Yahweh recognised that injustices would enter the covenant community and so built in a liberating mechanism to put things right and make things just
- Jubilee makes the vital point that it is Yahweh, not people, who own the land, 'The land is not to be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me' [Lev 25:23]
- Jubilee gives people their dignity; it allows the poor to meet their own needs and determine their own destiny rather than depending on charity
- It is not without significance that the *shophar* sounded the proclamation of Jubilee on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*, Lev 25:9); relationships with God were right, now human relationships were to be put right. Also an important link with Jesus identifying his ministry with Jubilee

Imagine how the slaves, the landless and the debtors felt at Jubilee! Imagine how the landowners, the bankers and the slave-owners felt at Jubilee! It sorted out deep and basic attitudes in the human heart.

Gospel: Jubilee : Shalom

'Are you the one John said was going to come,
or should we expect someone else?'

'At that very time Jesus cured many people of
their sicknesses, diseases and evil spirits
and gave sight to many blind people.'

'Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard;
the blind can see, the lame can walk,
lepers are cleansed, the deaf can hear,
the dead are raised,
the good news is preached to the poor.

Happy are those who have no doubts about me.'

[Luke 7:18-23 / Matt 11:2-19]

The question is a simple but important one, 'Is Jesus the Messiah?' The answer, according to Jesus is equally simple, 'Look at the evidence!' The Jews, of course, were looking primarily for a military conqueror to overthrow their enemies; this is why so few accepted him as Messiah. Jesus, drawing from important ideas in Isaiah



[26:19; 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1] shows that the signs of the Messiah are found in meeting the needs of the poor; a spiritual and physical victory greater than any political military conquest.

In Jesus' Nazareth manifesto, in his reply to John and throughout his public ministry we see the signs and character of the kingdom of God declared and illustrated among the poor, the needy and the disenfranchised.

In Jesus we see again Yahweh the herald leaping upon the hilltops with the good news of victory and peace [cf. Isa 52:7-12]. Nor is he simply bringing information, but the gospel of *shalom*. As in the ancient expectation, the *euangelion* is bringing the fruits of peace into tangible reality. 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard'.

In Jesus we see the essential elements of *shalom*: meeting material needs, establishing social justice and the call to personal integrity as central. In the ministry of Jesus, the practical and eschatological dimensions of *shalom* come together dramatically, in fact they come to life!

In Jesus we see the announcement of the kingdom of God, the preaching of the gospel, as the proclamation of God's eschatological Jubilee on every hand:

- **Rest for people and land:**
 - Luke 12:29-31 'Don't be anxious ...'
 - Luke 9:10-17 'Give them [multitude] something to eat ...'
- **Remission of debt:**
 - Luke 5:17-26 'Man, your sins are forgiven you ...'
 - Luke 7:36-50 'Her sins, which were many, are forgiven ...'
- **Release of captives:**
 - Luke 13:16-17 'Ought not this woman... be loosed ...?'
 - Mt 18:18 'Whatever is loosed on earth ...is loosed in heaven'
- **Restoration of property:**
 - Luke 19:1-10 'Half my goods I give to the poor' [Zacchaeus]
 - Luke 19:45 'My house a house of prayer' [Temple cleansing]

These, plus the quotations earlier, are just a few examples of the themes unfolding powerfully in Jesus' ministry. They not only set the scene to understanding Jesus' emphasis, but are also to set the agenda for the church.

GOD AND THE POOR

The poor and the faithful

In Hebrew society, like all societies, there were many poor people. While the covenant endeavoured to protect the poor its precepts were often neglected. Poverty was due to natural disasters, bad harvests, enemy invasion, exploitation by the rich,

sickness and death in the family. The poor were most likely to be the fatherless, the widow and the landless alien [Heb *gerim*]. The poor are those who have to beg; they are completely destitute (see Job 24:1-12). Other senses of poverty that come through the biblical text are: dependent, lowly, weak, famished.

In contrast, in Hebrew history, the word 'poor' *also* became a synonym for the 'pious (righteous) person'; those who describe themselves as the poor and needy in the face of hostility from the wicked. They do not believe in violence and so they call upon God for help:

'Incline your ear O Lord and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.
Preserve my life, for I am godly;
save your servant who trusts in you.'
[Ps 86:1-2; cf. 12:5; 37:1-40]

By the time of Jesus, the 'poor' has become a way of referring to those who humbly trust God, even though their faithfulness to him means oppression and material disadvantage. They are 'empty before God'.

In Jesus these two themes converge. In his day there was enormous poverty; over 40% taxation and many landless peasants. There were also many ordinary people patiently waiting for God to save them [like Simeon and Hannah]. Jesus proclaims to both:

To the spiritually faithful Jesus proclaims that God is making his move, 'the time is fulfilled'. To the destitute he declares that God is moving in power to meet their needs. Those who have nothing are often prepared to recognise God more clearly than the comfortable. So spiritual hunger and physical need are both on God's agenda.

Blessed are the poor

There is nothing at all 'blessed' or 'spiritual' about being poor; it is something God wants to free all people from. However, at the same time there is something profound and mysterious about God's relationship with the poor. It is quite clear from Scripture that he has a special identity and empathy with them:

- 'To oppress the poor is to insult their Maker' [Prov 14:31]
- 'One who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord' [Prov 19:17]

In the incarnation God becomes a human being, and in so doing he does not simply become a person, but poor [2 Cor 8:9]. His parents could only offer pigeons as a sacrifice [Luke 2:24]. He was a refugee [Matt 2:13-15]. He was a wandering teacher with no income or permanent dwelling [Matt 8:20]. His disciples were relatively uneducated people [Acts 4:13]. He offered his identity with the poor, as a sign that he was Messiah, but recognised it was also a possible offence [Matt 11:2-19]. The heart of the atonement is God identifying with the poor and suffering as a slave; while at

the same time smashing the forces that bind them, setting them free and making many rich.

Time and again God selects the weak and the powerless to pour out his blessings upon, and to fulfill his purposes through:

- God chose insignificant Israel because he loved her [Deut 7:7-8];
- The church is made up of insignificant people [1 Cor 1:26-29];
- God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith [Jas 2:1-7];
- God's strength is perfected in weakness [2 Cor 12:9].

There seems to be a wonderful mystery at work here:

- The poor are wholly dependent on God;
 - a sign of how God wants all people to be
- The poor are often more sensitive to God;¹
 - therefore more ready to receive from him
- The poor have such deeply rooted needs;
 - God just longs to bless them
- The poor constantly challenge the community;
 - how we treat them is a sign of our spirituality.

Throughout history God has always been found most clearly among the poor. The poor need the people of God to meet them in their distress. The people of God need the poor to challenge them about true spiritual values and attitudes.

The fast God chooses

The Bible is quite clear that material wealth is one of the many ways in which God blesses people [Gen 13:2; Ps 112:1, 3; 1Tim 6:17; etc.]. However, riches are a very real danger. The rich can fail to acknowledge God as its source [Deut 8:17-18]; trust in their riches [Ps 52:7]; become covetous for more [Exod 20:17], which is the root of evil [1 Tim 6:9-10]. You cannot serve God and riches [Matt 6:24]. The fact it is easier for a camel to go through the needle's eye than a rich person to enter the kingdom shows the profound spiritual dangers of riches [Mark 10:23-27].

The possession of wealth brings serious responsibility. The rich must see themselves as nothing more than stewards, servants of the bounty, which has God as its source. The presence of the poor gives them a constant opportunity to share bountifully with others the way God has shared generously with them.

The rich are frequently oppressors [Ps 10:1-18; Isa 3:14-25; Jer 5:26-29; 22:13-19; Ezek 16:49-50; Luke 6:20-25; Jas 5:3-5].

There is no true spirituality if there is no love and generosity towards the poor:

¹ This is said with a clear recognition that the poor may well take an embittered attitude towards God due to their circumstances.



‘Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house?’
[Isa 58:3-7]

The whole of Scripture is clear in its command to love and meet the needs of the poor, irrespective of their response in return:

‘You shall not wrong the stranger or oppress them, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict a widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry; and my wrath will burn ...’ (Exod 22:21-24)

‘For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, the terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving them food and clothing.’ (Deut 10:17-18)

‘When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends ... But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you.’ (Luke 14:12-14)

‘Lend expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish.’ (Luke 6:35-36)

CHURCH AND SHARING

All things in common

‘The company of believers were united in heart and mind.
No one said that any of the things they possessed were their own,
but they all shared with one another everything they had.’
(Acts 4:32)

All the evidence of the book of Acts points to the fact that the early Christians continued the economic sharing practised by Jesus [cf. 2:43-47; 4:32-37; 5:1-11; 6:1-7].

‘... all who believed were together and had all things in common.’
[2:44]

‘There was no needy person among them,
for as many as possessed land or houses sold them
.. and distribution was made to each as any had need.’
[4:34-35]



Even today we can still feel the joyful enthusiasm communicated by these words. There was no coercion or obligation to act like this [5:4]. It was not the abolition of private property. Nor was it a one-off act; 2:45 and 4:34 should be translated, 'They often sold possessions ...' and 'They were in the habit of regularly bringing the proceeds of what was being sold.' The key word that underlies their extravagant behaviour is the Greek word *koinonia*, which has the sense of 'sharing equally together'. There was this sense of being one family, one body, and so 'no one considered any of the things they possessed as their own' and all needs were met.

This behaviour was not restricted to Jerusalem. It was practised in all the communities of faith. In time the Christians in Judea began to face hardship and we see the other churches responding to their needs. The hardship was probably due to:

- Many old and poor people living in Jerusalem;
- A famine between 44 and 48 CE;
- Persecution which scattered many of the Christians elsewhere;
- Growing employment discrimination against Christians.

We no longer see sharing within a church, but sharing within the church; Gentile and Jewish believers meeting one another's needs.

'So the disciples [in Antioch] agreed to make a contribution, each according to their means, for the relief of their fellow Christians in Judea,' [Acts 11:29]

In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 we have the clearest picture of New Testament church giving to meet the needs of the poor:

'... their joy was so great that they were extremely generous in their giving, even though they are very poor. I assure you they gave as much as they could, and even more ... of their own free will'. [8:2-3]

'If you are eager to give, God will accept your gift on the basis of what you have, not on what you have not ... as a matter of equality your abundance at this time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be equality.' [8:12-15]

'Each one should give as they have decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the person who gives gladly. For God is able to give you more than you need, so that you will always have all you need for yourselves and more than enough for every good cause.' [9:7-8]

This is free, joyful giving to meet the needs of others. There is no obligation other than that of love out of the measure and as a sign of how God has blessed them [1 Cor 16:2]. This is *koinonia*.

Imitating God's kindness

'By loving you will be an imitator of God's kindness ... whoever takes upon themselves the burden of their neighbour, who wills to benefit another who is worse off ... who takes the things he has received from God and distributes them to those who are in need, this person becomes a god to the ones who receive. They are an imitator of God,' [Epistle of Diognetus]

The worship of the Christians in the early centuries was not just the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving but working and giving to relieve human suffering and need. In doing so they saw themselves as imitating how God acts. We let them speak for themselves:

▪ **Attitude:**

'Kindness to people on behalf of God is the only suitable sacrifice to God. He does not hear the prayer of the person who does not hear people in their need.' [Sextus]

'Let the strong take care of the weak ... Let the rich minister to the poor ... Let the wise show their wisdom, not in words but in deeds.' [Clement of Rome]

'All things are common, and the rich are not to be avaricious ... And it is not right for one to live in luxury, while many are in want. How much more glorious it is to do good to many than live sumptuously! How much wiser to spend money on human beings than on jewels and gold!' [Clement of Alexandria]

▪ **Impartiality:**

'Do good, and give liberally to all who are in need from the wages God gives you. Do not hesitate about to whom you should give. Give to all. For God wishes gifts to be made to all out of his bounties.' [Hermas]

'The Lord said to love not only our neighbours but our enemies, and to be givers and sharers not only with the good but also to be liberal givers toward those who take away our possessions.' [Irenaeus]

'Do not judge who is worthy and who unworthy, for it is possible for you to be mistaken in your opinion. In the uncertainty of ignorance it is better to do good to the unworthy for the sake of the worthy than by guarding against those who are less good not to encounter the good. For by being sparing and trying to test those who are well deserving or not, it is possible for you to neglect some who are loved by God.' [Clement of Alexander]

▪ **Giving:**

'Instead of the tithes which the law commanded, the Lord said to divide everything we have with the poor.' [Irenaeus]



'The contributions into the church's treasury are the trust funds of piety ... for feeding and burying the poor, for boys and girls destitute of property and parents; and for old people confined to the house and victims of shipwreck; and any who are in the mines ... and in prison ... So great a work of love burns a brand upon us. "See how they love one another".' [Tertullian]

- **Widows and orphans:**

'Christians love one another. They do not overlook the widow, and they save the orphan. The person who has shares ungrudgingly with those who do not have.' [Aristides]

'Widows are not to be neglected. You, after the Lord, be their protector.' [Ignatius]

- **Hospitality:**

'When they see strangers, they take them under their own roof and rejoice over them as a true family member.' [Aristides]

'The bishops always by their ministry ceaselessly shelter the destitute and the widows and always conduct their lives in purity. All these therefore will always be sheltered by the Lord.' [Hermas]

- **Burial:**

'When they see one of their poor has died they bury them.' [Aristides]

- **Prisoners:**

'If they hear some are condemned or imprisoned on account of the name of their Lord, they contribute to those condemned and send them what they need, and if possible redeem them.' [Aristides]

'At dawn there were seen waiting at the prison aged widows and orphan children; their leaders even slept inside with [the prisoner], having bribed the guards.' [Lucian of Samosata]

- **Fasting:**

'If there is any that is a slave or a poor man, the Christians fast for two or three days and what they were going to eat themselves they send to them.' [Aristides]

'On the day you fast you shall taste nothing but bread and water. Of the foods you were going to eat, reckon how much all the food of the day on which you were going to fast would cost and give the amount to a widow or orphan or one in need.' [Hermas]

- **Self sacrifice:**

'We know many among us who have given themselves into bondage in order that they might ransom others. Many delivered themselves into slavery and taking their price provided food for others.' [Clement of Rome]



In Dura-Europos, near the Euphrates, an early building dedicated to Christian worship has been discovered. It was two houses knocked into one; an upstairs worship area, below which was a room of the same size given over to storing goods for distribution to the poor. These Christians gave as much space to the needs of the poor as they did to worship!

Christian impact

Down through the centuries Christians have continued to make a huge impact in their care for the poor and needy. Let us reflect on this together.

EXERCISE 1. List as many of the areas of social concern as possible of which you are aware Christians have made a significant impact down through the centuries. Be as specific as possible and name individuals if you are able to do so.

EXERCISE 2: Review your list and see if you can identify any areas of social concern in which a Christian impact was absent. If so, can you think of any reason why this might have been the case?

NEED AND NEIGHBOUR

'I was hungry...'

'What must I do to receive eternal life?' ...
'Love God ... and your neighbour as your self.'
... 'Who is my neighbour?' ...
'Which of these three was a neighbour?'
'The one who was kind to him.'
'You go then and do the same.'
[Luke 10:25-37]

The power of the questions and answers in the story of the 'Good Samaritan' are inescapably hard-hitting. In summary it is saying that you cannot define a neighbour, you can only be a neighbour. A neighbour is anyone – irrespective of race, gender, creed – who faces need. Such a person is deserving of unqualified love. It is people who love God completely and others selflessly who are the kind of people who receive eternal life.

'I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you received me into your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me ... I tell you, whenever you did this to the least important of these brothers of mine, you did it for me!' [Matt 25:35-40]



These words of Jesus are exciting, disturbing and difficult. They are exciting because of the link made between actions towards people being actions towards Jesus. They are disturbing because of the consequences of the action or inaction [see esp. vv34 and 41]. They are difficult because there is debate as to whom Jesus is referring to by 'my brothers' [v40] and 'least important ones' [v45]. Is it non-Christian response to suffering Christians? But these unbelievers are spoken of as 'the righteous' [vv33,37]. Even if the primary meaning is a reference to poor believers, the rest of Jesus' teaching requires us to apply the principle to believing and unbelieving poor alike. In our treatment of the poor is our treatment of Jesus and such action has eternal consequences.

The poor are always with you

'Then Mary took very expensive perfume .. poured it on Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair ... One of Jesus' disciples said, "Why wasn't the perfume sold and the money given to the poor?" ... But Jesus said, "Leave her alone! Let her keep what she has done for the day of my burial. The poor will always be with you, but you will not always have me."' (John 12:3-7)

This story is important. The worship of Jesus is primary but, as we have seen, in the measure in which we care for the poor is the extent to which we show our love for him. Jesus will soon be gone; Mary senses this and anoints him in love. Jesus' reply to the quibble about waste suggests that from now on there will be ample opportunity to show care for the poor; though not in this physical way for Jesus. An implication that caring for the poor in the future would be a way of continuing to show extravagant affection for Jesus is a strong possibility.

The consistent testimony of Scripture is that worship and concern for the poor flow together. The long-running debate as to whether social action is a distraction for the church is easily answered. Worship and care for the poor cannot be separated. Christians know that until the *parousia* the poor will always be among them. Until Jesus returns they work to meet need, change structures and witness to the one who though 'rich, yet for our sakes became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich' [2 Cor 8:9]. The principle still applies.

EXERCISE 3: Give a clear definition of the word 'poor' which would help Christians identify them in today's world.

EXERCISE 4: According to the above definition, among which social groups and areas of society [national and international] would you expect to find the poor? List as many as you can below.

Hunger and thirst after justice

The challenge of the poor is a constant challenge to our spirituality and the true character of our concerns. Jesus says:

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after
righteousness / justice, you shall be satisfied.’
(Matt 5:6)

‘Seek first the kingdom of God
and his righteousness / justice
and all these things will be added to you.’
(Matt 6:33)

The Greek word *dikaiosune* can mean both ‘righteousness’ and ‘justice’. There is certainly a sense of double meaning in both these sayings of Jesus. The desire to be the people God wants us to be in our relationship with him, but recognising that to be that kind of person it requires that we work for justice and the needs of the poor.

What can we do? Here are some suggestions:

- **Think right:** identify injustice in our heart and attitudes;
- **See straight:** recognise injustice at all levels of society;
- **Pray through:** ask for God's wisdom, agenda and power;
- **Be vulnerable:** open yourself to others in time, money, security;
- **Shout loud:** make your voice heard in the social / political arena;
- **Join forces:** link with other groups in key areas / issues;
- **Step out:** move into spaces where nothing is being done;
- **Stand firm:** amid inevitable resistance and opposition.

A simple working maxim

- ‘What is in your heart?’
- ‘What is in your hand?’
- ‘What is in your reach?’

Questions and Reflections

1. Has the principle of ‘Jubilee’ any practical significance in the life of the new covenant? If so, how could it be practised by Christians today? If not, does it have any significance at all?

2. To what extent should ‘evangelism’ and ‘social involvement’ be seen as one single Christian activity? Does this way of thinking present any dangers? Does failing to think this way present dangers?

3. How are we to understand the word 'need' in our consumer-orientated world? How does our understanding of 'need' influence our understanding of 'the poor'? What issues are these words really touching?

Reading and Resources

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