

Our Gospel Response to Poverty in NZ Part One¹

Mark 5:21–43

In my role as a priest and also as the City Missioner, I get to hear some fairly heart breaking tales from those I serve. I must admit that I have a talent for being able to hear some extraordinary heart breaking stories, offer spiritual care and prayer, perhaps anointing with oil, and as soon as the person leaves I'm able to place the burden of the story down.

There is one story recently however where it has rested longer within me. I find myself in the relatively rare position of holding this woman's story to me; I almost don't want to let it go. Of all the pastoral situations I've encountered, this story has hooked in to me. Ironically it was told almost casually while the two of us were in the car driving home from up north. I think we'd just driven past Paraparaumu, when she started to share with me some events from her childhood.

This woman, whom I'll call Gina, was raised in poverty within a gang. The father is a gang leader, the mother has struggled regularly with alcoholism. By the time Gina was only around five years of age, their parents would leave them to go on a drinking binge for up to two to three days. So Gina would go with her brothers and sisters across the road to their neighbours to eat a meal. Because her father was a gang leader, the neighbours were too terrified to do anything other than make sure they wouldn't get in trouble. They were fed; but little else.

As Gina grew up, her parents separated. She went from one parent to the other, until neither wanted her and she was placed into the care of extended whanau. By this time she was about 11 years of age and she had left school. For the next four years, she was regularly raped by a relative. Not surprisingly, she became pregnant. She left pregnant, now just at sixteen and by this time four years out of school, and went back to her mother. Her mother sent her to her father's; who also sent her away. She lived by herself, went into labour by herself, adopted the baby out by herself. She told me that once she walked out of the hospital, she turned up at a friend's place and got absolutely wasted on alcohol.

It was around this experience that she was determined to take her life. She prayed to God by laying down a Gideon's fleece of sorts; she told God that unless someone turns up tonight, she will end her life. That night, her grandparent knocked on the door. Gina opened it and her Nan simply said to her 'I'm here.' Gina never rang or contacted her. This small moment has remained a profound milestone of God's providence in Gina's life.

¹ Given by Susan Blaikie, Wellington City Missioner, at St. Michael's 1st July, 2012.

Gina's story is full of poverty; neglect at the deepest of levels, secrecy, shame and rejection. For me, Gina has experienced almost everything the Mission has been founded for and serves, other than care for her as a senior! She has experienced hunger, financial devastation, homelessness, abuse, isolation, a failed education, broken family. I met Gina at Arohata Prison; she now has a fairly serious criminal record on top of all that I have just shared with you.

You know what I would wish for Gina? To be the woman in the Gospel story you just heard this morning. Because this woman, with her bleeding disorder, would know some of the shame, the stigmatism, the secrecy and isolation of Gina. Here is this woman, in the middle of a crowd jostling around Jesus, reached out to touch Jesus and drew from him his power; she was healed. And in that healing, she was made clean again. No more isolation. No more ostracism or shame. Restoration and healing; the great *great* Gospel of God breaks into this woman's life in a mere moment. Throw in Jairus' daughter's rising from the dead and we've got profound kingdom-breaking power and restoration happening here.

Gina so *needs* this story to break into her life. And when I read it, there is a part of me that almost begs for the cloak of Jesus; just for one touch so Gina can draw upon the power of Christ, so she may be healed and profoundly delivered. Just for a mere moment for the Kingdom to profoundly break upon her in power; to heal and restore her broken identity...

And yet, I also have to live with the tension that the cloak *is* here. We are Jesus' cloak. We are Jesus' power. We are his salt, light and leaven that will restore and heal Gina's identity. We are the body of Christ. His work, his word, his life, his restoration, his power, his kingdom... in fact we're simply *his*.

Mission is God's Yes to Gina. It is God's Yes to us and indeed to all of creation. God's Yes that he has not abandoned creation, but has restored and is restoring through the one extraordinary act of self-giving on the cross. God's Yes!

Mission is also God's No. It is God saying to us that we cannot save ourselves. Mission can never be reduced to the best we can hope to achieve as humans together. Mission is not about eliminating poverty, ending violence, overcoming prejudice in all of its forms by the work of our hands. Mission can never ever be reduced to only a social or political movement.

Mission is our participation in God's mission, by God's invitation, to God's people, to God's world. It will always be Jesus' power, Jesus' cloak, Jesus' touch to stem the bleeding or raise the dead. It's all God's mission from the alpha to the omega.

Neither however does God call us to be passive while God does the work. If God cries for the poor, then His tears must also be our own. If God goes to the cross for those who suffer, then his suffering must also be our own. If God's heart is broken for the Ginas of

the world, then my heart must be broken. If God cries out to the lost, the last and the least, then my being must also cry out to the lost, the last and the least.

Mission is never one agenda of the church. It is *the* agenda of the church; it defines us as God's people. It is not an optional extra. It's not something we send people to do; it's what we are. It is not something we do once we have our finances just right or the church rosters full; it is our daily bread. Mission simply is the Gospel lived out. It is the outworking of grace itself. To not be missional is to be quite frank, to be unfaithful to the image of Christ. And promoting a false image of God, I assure you, gets God riled.

I want to quote to you something from Paul Anderson from his book *An Emergent Theology for Emergent Churches*:

A mission Gospel goes right to the heart of humanity and takes up the cause of humans in their time of need and distress. Claiming that salvation has come to humans without seeking to correct injustice and restore dignity and value to human life is to defraud the humanity of the Gospel; it is cheap grace. Offering salvation for the soul alone and promising peace and justice only in the life to come is to abandon Christ in this world while hoping to be with him in the next.

These are quite strong words; and they need to be. Because if there is any voice in New Zealand that should be the most consistent, the most creative, the most active and risky in the public square to our nation's poverty, the topic we'll be touching on today, it should be the church. It should be this strange group of people who lose themselves to gain their life in Christ. This foolish group of people who do stupid things like recklessly give away their goods, share their life in common, recklessly love, foolishly forgive, embrace their enemies, focus first on the socially stigmatised, and live with and alongside the last the least and the littlest. *We should be disturbing to our world, as much as we find our world disturbing.*

So, how do we as God's people in God's mission, make our response to poverty in our country? *The first thing is that we have to open our world to be disturbed by poverty.* Poverty thrives in a society that is essentially idolatrous; a society that worships the work of its hands. Let me unwrap this further for you. I was teaching on a part of the Decalogue recently; the Ten Words or Ten Commandments. In doing this I drew back to the very first theology paper I did at Otago entitled *Ethics, Law & Religion*. The author of the paper, Professor Gregory McCormack, went through each of the commandments. When we got to the commandment of 'Thou shall not kill' he explained how the Hebrew word for 'kill' encapsulates more than murder, as it includes accidental killing. He went on to say that this commandment not only covers murder but that we are to care that people are killed.

He writes '**We are not to be indifferent to blood; those called by YHWH cannot sit absorbed in their gods while throughout the world people are dying painfully of starvation and diseases and violence inflicted on them.**'

The same of course applies to poverty. We are not to have a life that is so consumed by the work of our hands that we become indifferent to the poverty of our neighbour. Now this is a difficult commandment; in fact of course it's simply unobtainable in our own strength. I cannot wake up each day and be disturbed by the poverty of our society. I cannot wake up and agitate myself afresh with the knowledge that around 170,000 children wake up with me to a life that is sustained by incomes well below the 50% median income poverty; where one adult with their child will be lucky to have \$150 per week to meet all of their expenses other than rent. Instead the busyness of my life and my issues grip and consume me. My job, my busyness, my covetousness, my work of my hands engross me to the point that I do not notice that my neighbour struggles to feed their child or heat their home.

Take this to the wider body of our Anglican Church; what idols consume us as a gathered people? What are the topics that dominate our conversation? What are the questions and concerns that we fervently dialogue and act on? What disturbs our world as we gather as the Anglican Church here in Kelburn, here in Wellington, here in New Zealand or in our worldwide communion?

Recently, I had the great pleasure of meeting some girls from the Upper School at Samuel Marsden. We met together to plan a service together, and at that service I was going to preach about the Mission. And as we talked, they spoke very honestly about how useless it would generally be for me to talk to them about how privileged they are, and how they should give out of their abundance etc. They wanted to find a way where in some way, the realities of poverty would disturb the world of the girls; would shake them up. So we talked about leaving the girls with a tangible exercise they could do that would in some small way break open their worlds to the poverty that is right here on our doorstep in Wellington.

What I asked the girls to do was to go home and find a chipped cup; when they found one, to place it in their bedroom for a period of time. Each time they look at it, to reflect on their own chips and brokenness... the world tends to throw away chipped and broken cups, but God uses our chips and brokenness to disturb our world. The Western World seeks a pain-free existence that isolates and engrosses us in consumerism... the chipped cup goes against our perception of beauty and perfection. Chipped cups are certainly undesirable to entertain with. Chipped cups shame us; I always apologise to anyone if I serve them a drink in a chipped cup.

Yet it's our chips, our brokenness, our suffering, that if we have courage to walk the narrow road, drive us deeper into God and away from the work of our hands. Our chips allow us to embrace our neighbour deeper, rather than exclude them in the pursuit of the perfect cup. It's our chips that helps us to open up our world, and thus in this particular instance, to the poverty of our neighbour.

We need our chipped cups to disturb our world.

What I would like for you to do is, if you can find one, grab a chipped cup and place it beside your bed. Next week I'll be talking more about poverty, but I want to come to you with your worlds more disturbed by our poverty than where you are today. I want you to use your chips to connect deeper with our national poverty in some creative way. If you haven't done so, I would encourage you to either come to the City Mission if you can eat breakfast or lunch time and share your meal with some of our poor. You can also go to the soup kitchen in Tory Street, or go to Downtown Community Ministry off Taranaki Street where you'll see most of our homeless. You can read the articles on poverty that are linked into the Facebook site if you're on Facebook. You can go to the Centre of Public Theology & Issues site down in Otago University where there are great articles written on the Christian response to poverty.

I would love it, if we could gather next week, and you have a story on your hearts that, like me with Gina's story, you cannot put down.