

Our Gospel Response to Poverty in NZ Part Two

Mark 5:21–43 (25-34)

If you weren't here last week, we began our talk on our Christian response; emotionally, physically and spiritually, individually and collectively, to poverty within New Zealand. I spent a fair bit of time last week focusing on the foundation of our missional or gospel response to poverty as Christians. I want to reiterate two important points from last week. The first is that our response to poverty can never be solely a socio-political response for us as a church; one where we aim for the best for people in respect of fair wealth distribution; fair wages; minimal income gap between the richest and the poor etc. God's work is so much more than human progress. Our expression rather is faithfulness to the being and mission of God in God's world; it is our gospel. We are the first fruits, the breaking in, a fragment of, an experimental garden of God's restoration and redemption of creation through the crucified Son. Consequently our response to poverty is always first and foremost one of faithfulness to the image and work of God in our world.

The second point comes from the chipped or broken cup I hope you found over the week and placed in your room. We use our brokenness, the chips, to move us engage freshly with our local poverty; *to allow poverty to disturb our world afresh*. I don't know how many of you created space within your week to engage anew with our local poverty. If you don't work or perhaps live with poverty, then the effect of poverty can leave us feeling uncomfortable.

I spent about an hour on Friday afternoon with Pam who is the receptionist at The Mission in Newtown. When we were there we had a gentleman come in who wanted some extra money for a wake (he was on our budgeting programme). We then had a couple come in who needed something for setting up a house, because they were coming to the end of their three months from their Salvation Home having recently exited Rimatika Prison. We also had a social worker come in with a client to ask for food as they had no money until Monday. I'm not often at the front desk so it was a great opportunity for me to experience a different side of The Mission. And the side that I experienced in that moment was the shame of poverty; to have to ask for the most basic provisions of daily life: food; utensils; towels; and the financial means to attend the wake and funeral of a loved one.

So, what responses might we as Christians make to the poverty of our neighbour here in New Zealand that is birthed from our faithfulness to the image and mission of our God?

For all of our responses, there is a micro response and a macro. There is what we do as individuals in the body of Christ, and what we do corporately as the body of Christ.

There is what we do to address individual sin that ignores or exacerbates poverty, and what we do to address corporate structures that ignore or exacerbates poverty.

Today isn't about giving you a list on possible gospel responses to poverty. Rather I hope today is about offering you another layer to help us find our voice, or more specifically the stimulus for our voice, in our individual and corporate response to poverty within NZ.

The first place I'm going to start is with my own sin in relation to poverty. It has taken me a very long time, too long, to realize my own sin not only in my attitude towards poverty, but also how much I had allowed my bourgeois existence to filter in to my Christian living.

In David Bosch's book *Transforming Mission*, he writes about the church's response to poverty:

We can fall into the trap of being a 'church *for* the poor' rather than 'the church *of* the poor'...it is not so much of a case of the poor needing the church, but of the church needing the poor – if we wish to stay close to our poor Lord...the poor are not the objects of mission but its agents and bearers.

Jesus made himself deliberately poor; we see this in the gospel story as Jesus instructs his disciples to be materially dependent on those who would take them in. Jesus intentionally lived alongside the poor (in the broadest sense of the word; including those who are marginalized). Our Lord, whom we will receive in bread and wine very soon, deliberately gave up material wealth and comfort to be alongside the poor every day. Jesus didn't have to theorize about the plight of poverty; he experienced it daily, as did his followers. It was their daily bread.

It has taken me years to realize that it is not so much about me being there *for* the poor, as Bosch writes, but to bring the reality of my Lord who made himself poor into my own daily response. In short, *I needed more poverty in my life*. Isn't that an extraordinary thing; to want *more* poverty in my life? It couldn't be a more oppositional desire to the western ladder of material success and progress.

Our church, with all of its money and building issues, suffers dreadfully from a lack of poverty. We are quite simply too well off.

So, to work through my repentance of my sin in avoiding poverty, my husband and I had some long and deep discussions. How could we bring poverty more into our daily life? We did it first by opening up our resources in our home for common use; much like the Acts church. For the first time in my life, I gave away my house key to various people whom I knew didn't have the resources that Duncan and I had such as a washing machine and dryer.

When my daughter moved out, we moved in Courtney Wilson when she was six months pregnant.

We moved into Newtown at the beginning of this year and opened our lives to ex-prisoners and a teenage boy who walked out of their previous lives with their whole material possessions contained on a trolley. I can tell you that Dunc and I are in many ways fiscally poorer than we have been in a long time because the level of subsidizing we are doing on a daily basis. Yet, in that daily living of breathing, eating, sleeping with the poverty of not only my neighbour but my new whanau, I obtained an unexpected opening of my eyes and heart to Jesus who made himself poor.

The church is not the church *for* the poor, but the church *of* the poor. How can we bring more poverty into our own life and the life of our church right here?

As I have brought poverty more into my daily life, I have moved from a position that poverty in our country is inevitable or a temporary inconvenience that one can move oneself out of... to one closer to Gustavo Gutierrez who has worked with some of the poorest in the world. Gustavo once quoted that poverty **'is a subhuman condition...an evil and scandalous condition.'** Miguez Bonino summarized poverty simply as **'a total system of death.'** Both of these men work deeply and closely with poverty and our gospel.

My original position led me to rarely think let alone voice any concern about poverty in New Zealand. But as poverty has become more and more a part of my daily life, its extraordinary impact to silence, to marginalize, to stigmatize, to isolate and to lock people into a cycle of hopelessness has led me to have quite a different and stronger voice.

For me, poverty in NZ is an evil and scandalous condition. It has taken me about four years of increasingly bringing poverty into my life that has led me to get so furious and intolerant of it. *It has taken me far too long to find my voice in it. It has taken us too long as a church to find our public voice in it. Our church in NZ still fails profoundly in providing public forums for the poor to have their voice heard.*

You don't need to listen to me today. I would have loved for you to have listened to Leigh and Mark; a young couple who have experienced poverty for most of their adult lives. Not only would it be a gift to us as we experience to a deeper level being a church *of* the poor, but it would mean a tremendous amount for this couple's voice to be heard. It would allow them, for just a moment, to critique their own world and realize that poverty isn't their God-given lot; that their poverty is an evil and scandalous condition that our God has made a profound and costly response to in the Cross. Their poverty is a subhuman condition that God calls us to be His firstfruits of his redemption in and for, and to give priority to.

And should we find our voice, should we allow the poor to speak into our lives corporately and individually... should we open up our daily lives to poverty individually and corporately, then it is quite extraordinary how many opportunities there are to respond to poverty in creative, costly and above all, *faithful* ways.

Let me talk to you about one such opportunity. In Isaiah 65, God shares with Isaiah His vision for our new heaven and earth. This is what is written from verse 20 to 23:

Never again will there be an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years...they will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them.

We have families whom we support at the City Mission who have a mother and father who work full time. For one family, the mother works full time during the day and the father works at night. Both of them are on minimum wage of \$13.50 per hour, and they have three children. They live in a housing corporation home in Lower Hutt. They toil in vain, every day, so that while they receive minimum wage, those above them live in their homes. They work so that others enjoy the fruit of their labour, while they go home exhausted and still unable to live in their own home or enjoy the work of their hands.

In May this year, the Service Food & Workers Union (SFWU) launched a living wage campaign. A brochure on the Living reads as follows; 'The purpose of living wage... is to help lift working families above the poverty line. Living wage policies focus on paying all employees a living wage and requiring businesses that have contracts or receive subsidies from public funds to pay their employees a living wage. That rate is set independently and is based on the needs of a household. Many local authorities around the world have taken steps to become living wage employers.'

Living Wage is just one of many responses to poverty in New Zealand. It has taken a Union, who is responsible for over 20,000 men and women across NZ to lead this campaign, because every day they hear their working poverty. They hear the cry God hears: they toil in vain; they fear their children are doomed to misfortune; they receive poor wages so other people can live in their own homes, while the reality of their own is whittled away in the cost of daily bread. These families have to make choices such as heating or food; recreation for the children or heating/food; shoes and clothes or food. They are our working poor.

It has taken a union to be a voice for these poor, and they have invited the church to have a voice in it. *They invited us!*

Do I have a voice for this? Do you have a voice for this? Do we as a church in Kelburn have a voice? Do we as a wider church? On what authority does our voice lie; are we a church *for* the poor or *of* the poor? *Are we stirred up enough to consider the minimum wage evil and subhuman when it locks families into a working poverty where they toil in vain; never to enjoy their own fruit or own their own home?*

Perhaps most importantly, can we run the race? Campaign for Living Wages is a five to ten year campaign, just as similar campaigns such as fair trade, organics or free range eggs, chicken or pork have taken many years to filter into our lives and consumer choices.

Recently I re-read the five planks of our Hikoi of Hope in 1998. One of those planks was 'Addressing Poverty' of which the following was written:

The Church is not promoting unnecessary handouts or welfare measures that are not affordable. Nor does it want to see people trapped in poverty and hardship with almost no opportunity to improve their circumstances. Each household must have sufficient income to meet their fundamental needs for food, housing, clothing and medical expenses to have any real chance of becoming independent...The Hikoi of Hope calls on the Government and the nation to listen to the voices and experiences of the poor and to acknowledge that there must be better policy approaches which enable justice and dignity for all New Zealanders.

We found our voice extraordinarily in 1998. Who and how will we be God's voice in poverty today?