

Be Generous With Them

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church, Sept 4th, 2022 (Deut 15:7-11, Prov 31:8-9, Luke 4:17-19 & John 10:10)

In my university days I took a subject called 'Economic Development of the Third World). It was taught by a Christian and a Marxist economist. Each week we would have to watch a documentary about the plight of the developing world. One really shook me up, it was from an African country and in it we saw the faces of starving children with distended stomachs almost pleading with us to help. Immediately. I at the end of class, fled and cried all the way back to my room. I cried and cried and found myself trying to work out why I had been so affected. I remember thinking that somehow, I was connected to this as was my God.

So, what is poverty and what does God have to say about it? What should my response to it be?

Poverty is where people do not have the economic means to live as the average person in society does. I could bore you with definitions of absolute or relative poverty, rather I want to invite you to think about what it might be like to live in poverty, a situation that the Hebrew Bible calls scandalous.

I want you to imagine that today you return home to find that all of your furniture has been taken away¹ – beds, tables, chairs, couches, TV's, all that remains is a few old blankets and a rickety chair. Most of your clothes have been tossed out, you now only have a pair of jeans, a shirt and a jumper. There is only one pair of shoes and they are falling apart. In the kitchen everything is gone – fridge, microwave, oven, appliances and all you have are some matches, a packet of flour and some mouldy vegetables. You go to the loo only to find that the water is disconnected and as it gets dark you realise there is no power. There has been a storm and part of the roof has fallen in, so you have to use a tarp to stop the rain getting in. There are no phones and you now have to walk to the river to get water. All books and magazines have been removed, but that is not really a problem as you can't read anyway. Access to hospital and medical care has also been taken away, although if you are really desperate. you could hop on your bike and ride 20kms to try and get help. Oh, and by the way you no longer have a job, all you have to live on is about \$2 per day.

This is what life is like for about 9.3% of the world. More than 1.2 billion children and their families live like this and worse. Whilst few in Australia live in such abject poverty, we know that with the cost of living increasing daily more and more of our neighbours are slipping into what we call relative poverty.

Poverty according to the Hebrew bible is scandalous. Job and Amos remind us that sometimes the reason people live in poverty is because others have taken advantage of them, they have not taken care of them. Leviticus and Deuteronomy is full of laws

¹ Exercise taken from 'God, Justice and Power' by Scripture Union & Tear Fund p. 10

telling the people about how they are to treat the poor – leaving food in their fields so the poor can eat. Fraudulent behaviour is condemned, debts are cancelled after seven years, and slaves are to be returned after seven years. Laws designed to ensure that the poor get a fair go. The Hebrew Bible goes further than just denouncing poverty, it calls for the people to act and change their circumstances.² Poverty, then we can say is contrary to the will of God, in fact it is offensive. Poverty is not the fault of those experiencing it, there are more than enough resources in this world to provide for all. I remember back at Uni being horrified to learn that the grain that Russia used to throw out (presumably because they couldn't sell it at the right price) could have feed the entire developing world We get people to grow crops that we need rather than use the land to provide food for their own families as payment for money we have lent them. Poverty is more about greed rather than the laziness of others. Poverty is scandalous to God.

The New Testament takes up the same theme. How often are the rich condemned, how often does Jesus challenge them to sell what they have and give to the poor. Think about the conversion of Zacchaeus, he after conversing with Jesus goes and gives back the money he has obtained by deception. It is harder for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle says Jesus. The rich man who neglected Lazarus at his front gate ends up in the eternal fire and Lazarus ends up with God. The widow who gave out of her poverty is praised above the one who gives a significant amount of money, but which is a small amount of his wealth. Blessed are the poor says Jesus and in his parable about the sheep and goats it those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give water to the thirsty, visit the prisoner and take care of the sick that are commended.

To God poverty is scandalous and we as followers of Jesus are called to act. Sure, we can pray for those who struggle but I suspect God wants us to do more. We can give money to the poor and we do that in a variety of ways – by sponsoring children in the developing world, by giving food donations to the Houses of Hope.

Perhaps we can do more, perhaps we need to look at our super and investments and forego our dividends in order that others have a chance to earn a living and live with dignity. Perhaps we can agitate for first world countries to forgive the debt of developing countries so they might have a fighting chance. Perhaps we should buy clothes made by people who earn a fair wage. Perhaps we can buy Fair Trade tea, coffee, chocolate to ensure farmers get a fair price.

Poverty is scandalous to God.

We are commanded to be generous to them, in order that they may have life and have it abundantly.

² From 'A Theology of Liberation' by Gustavo Gutierrez p. 167

Perhaps it is time to not just tell good news to the poor but to make a real difference to their situation, that I think is the will of God. Let's share the blessings of God with all the world. Amen.
