

Poverty/Peace Psalm 85:8-end
Advent 2 Dec 6th 2020

We are continuing to look at Homelessness as our kind of overarching theme this Advent. Last week I spoke about types of homelessness and today we are going to look at poverty, because poverty is the main underlying cause of homelessness. As we heard last week, being homeless isn't just sleeping rough, it encompasses those in temporary, insecure, inadequate, overcrowded and unaffordable housing as well.

I would imagine that everyone here has some sort of support system, family and friends who would help if you found yourself in financial straits or suffering from mental health problems. Not everyone has those support systems. It might be that their family and friends are in equally difficult circumstances or that they are estranged from family or just don't have any.

We are used to thinking about poverty in other countries, we hear about famines in Africa and floods in India and because the pictures we see of these things are so extreme and terrible it is easy to comfort ourselves that no-one in this country is in such an awful position. Well starvation in this country may be rare (although it does happen) but malnutrition is an increasing problem. There are areas of this country where Rickets is making a comeback.

In 2018 the CAB found that at least 140,000 households including many with children or someone with a long-term health problem, went without power because they could not afford it.

The Living wage foundation stated that many of the poorest parents went without meals and that a third of parents on low incomes do this regularly.

4.2 million children (and in the last 2 years this has certainly risen) live in poverty.

100,000 children don't have 3 meals a day or a warm winter coat.

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So apart from these horrible facts, how are we measuring poverty? Well it is based on a household income that is 60% of the median or average income. So the average income in the UK now is around £29,400 meaning that any household that has £17,640 or less a year is deemed to be in poverty. But that doesn't take into account the size of the household. A single person might struggle to make ends meet but imagine how much worse that would be for a family of 4, or 6 or more.

Well that is a lot of facts and figures, but I thought I might give you an illustration. When my son was 6 his teacher was a friend of mine. He was complaining that there was a child in his class who was stealing from lunch boxes. All the children knew who it was and had told the teacher. When I spoke to my friend about it, she told me that the little boy in question was coming to school without breakfast and was hungry because there was no food in the house. She told him not to steal anymore but to come to her and she brought in food for him every day. That was nearly 30 years ago and being on the PTA and a School Governor it was the only case that we knew about at that time. The demographic of that school has changed dramatically. Now, like many others it has a breakfast club, not just to provide wraparound care for working parents, but to ensure that the many poor children who now go there are able to eat before starting their school day. Recently that school was asked by a local charity if there was anything they needed. They asked for a washing machine and tumble dryer so that they could wash some of the children's clothes because so many of the parents could not afford to or didn't have the facilities. Hygiene poverty is a huge issue now, which is why, along with foodbanks we now have hygiene banks and schools holding supplies of sanitary products to give to young people who just can't afford them.

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So, what has all this got to do with us? What is our responsibility and how does it relate to our reading?

Well in Psalm 85 God promises us Peace and Salvation and the Psalmist goes on to talk about God's Love and Righteousness and provision for us. We are truly blessed, and we are also expected to bless others. To not only live righteous lives but to work for righteousness in our world wherever and however we can. To bring the Shalom of God to others, the Hebrew word for Peace, Shalom isn't just a passive feeling but a dynamic life of well-being, something the poor in this country most certainly do not have.

You may have heard the famous quote of William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, back in the 19th Century.

"While women weep, as they do now, I'll fight.

While little children go hungry now, as they do, I'll fight.

While men go to prison, in and out, in and out, as they do now, I'll fight.

While there is a drunkard left,

While there is a poor girl lost upon the streets,

While there remains one dark soul without the light of God,

I'll fight, I'll fight to the very end".

How shameful that a century and a half later in the 6th richest economy in the world there are still little children going hungry and suffering from diseases we had once eradicated from this country.

What can we do? What should we do? Obviously, we don't all have a calling and the God given passion to work amongst the poor in the way that William Booth did.

We can and should of course pray. But if we do we must be prepared that in some way God might expect us to be at least a small part of the answer to our prayers. We can give generously.

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At St Mary's we support the Family Support Worker who works directly with some of the very poorest families across Sussex.

At Holy Trinity we support the Food and Hygiene Banks and Seaview who support some of the most vulnerable people in Hastings.

And I am sure you all support other charities in lots of generous ways. Could we give more – almost certainly. Could we do anything practical? Possibly. If we refuse to look at and know about these things, then we are in effect walking by on the other side of the road. If we care about making a fairer more supportive society then we can make our opinions known. Again this is not about Party Politics, but if we know that something is being discussed in Parliament that will affect the poor and or the homeless then we can write to our MP. How many people here have written to Huw Merriman about anything at all in the last year? He is there to represent us, and he can only do that if he knows what we think.

We could be brave and ask God what He wants us to do, but only if we are prepared to do whatever he says.

Of course we can't solve all the problems of the world, but as we enjoy the Love and Faithfulness, Righteousness, Peace and Salvation along with all the material wealth that God has given us we can learn to share and to do what we are able to.