

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – 14 October 2018

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With contributions from a group from Priority Area congregations: thanks to Brian Casey, Katie Henderson, Rebecca Pennykid, Barry Watson and Leila Wright.

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Introduction

Wednesday 17 October is the United Nations' International Day for the Eradication of Poverty and in Scotland this is marked by Challenge Poverty Week, an annual event organised by the Poverty Alliance, who engage with voluntary organisations, policy makers and politicians in anti-poverty work. This year Challenge Poverty Week is being held from 1-7 October and Challenge Poverty Sunday will be 14th October.

The main aims of the week are to:

- Increase awareness of the reality of poverty in Scotland
- Encourage engagement in positive debate and discussion about poverty
- Highlight what is currently being done to tackle poverty
- Identify solutions to poverty in Scotland

Since the early 1990s the Church of Scotland has placed a priority on putting resources into the most deprived communities, leading to the establishment of the [Priority Areas](#) committee in 2003. However, while there is great work happening in Priority Area congregations (those in the 5% most deprived parishes), it is important to recognise that the priority for the poorest and the most marginalised is the gospel imperative facing the whole church.

For Challenge Poverty Sunday we are asking every congregation in the country to look at poverty in their own community. Every parish will contain people who are in poverty, even if some of it is hidden. The "[Deprivation Stats](#)", which can be found via [Church Finder](#) has been produced to show some of these statistics and to help congregations explore the challenges facing people in their communities. Once we have reflected on this, we then have to ask how we respond to it and that will look different in every situation, depending on which indicator is most relevant.

To highlight some of the ways in which Priority Area congregations have responded to the issues facing their communities, we have produced videos which look at projects relating to the seven main indicators in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD): [income](#), [health](#), [access to services](#), [employment](#), [education](#), [crime](#) and [housing](#). If you have the technology, we would encourage you to show one or more of these during worship as a way of highlighting how the church is engaging in anti-poverty work at a local level, and also so share them via Facebook at [Priority Areas](#).

[Job 23:1-9, 16-17](#)

This passage comes in the middle of the conversation between Job and his three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Maamathite. Job is given lots of advice about how he should deal with his suffering but his friends never try and intercede on his behalf (as God tells them in chapter 42 they should have done).

The poetic form of the language used can make it difficult for a modern reader to really get to grips with this text, but in the same way as in Shakespeare's plays, there is much which resonates once you dig into it. Job teaches us how to lament, an important part of our spiritual vocabulary. *The Message* translation expresses part of this passage in a way which will resonate with many of us: "God has no right to treat me like this— it isn't fair!" It connects to the question people often ask: "why me?"

Many of us will also empathise with Job's desire to "lay my case before him." How often do we get bogged down in legalistic complaints around the problems in our life? We can tie ourselves up in legal arguments when actually it's more about what *we're* doing than what God's doing.

What does this passage tell us about poverty? In the previous chapter Eliphaz has implied that Job is suffering because he isn't faithful enough to God. We are often guilty of doing the same thing to those in poverty, saying that they can "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," rather than looking at the wider structural issues. In Job we know that his suffering comes from God's removing His protection over him. How much of this is true for those suffering from poverty? How many of our complaints should be towards God and how many of our problems are manmade (or, less often, womanmade)?

[Psalm 22](#)

In the opening of the Psalm, we hear a cry from the psalmist. There is not anger, but rather, sadness in the words, a longing for God in moments of brokenness. There is a humanity in feeling distant from God that extends beyond race, class, gender, and age. This feeling of distance connects us as humans but also connects us to Christ on the cross in His final moments. There is comfort in knowing that there are times when even Christ felt as though His cries were being ignored by God.

"But I am a worm" (v.6), paints the image of being below human life and not amongst it. Referring to oneself as a worm is beyond humility and is similar to those who struggle with mental health or self-image. Being a worm is below human life but yet still carries the

weight of humans. God would remind us in this low moment and outlook that even worms are necessary in the world, for they encourage growth and a resurgence of life.

The second half of this passage recalls the idea that God is Alpha and Omega. God is present in our creation, holding us steady in our mother's womb as life starts for each individual. "You put me into the dust of death" (v.15) reminds us that God's hand is still there guiding us as we take our final breaths and return to the earth from which we began as humans. God's reign extends beyond the timeline of life.

Verse 14 refers to the human body as a physical experience of emotions. The idea of a heart melting like wax is an easy feeling to imagine within your ribs. The image of melting wax shows something that is not broken, just a reshaped solid. Our emotions can change and affect who we are as individuals but they do not break us. Heat and pressure on wax changes its form; they do not make it unusable or fractured. Wax can be ever-changing but still usable, just like us, even as our emotions change who we are and how we feel, we are not broken by them.

[Hebrews 4:12-16](#)

The origins of Hebrews are unknown in terms of authorship but the title gives us a sense of its probable audience, a community rooted in Jewish tradition. The author sets out what is essentially a five point sermon, arguing the supremacy of the new covenant (the Son) over five different parts of the old covenant with which they would have been familiar. Verses 12-16 mark a transition from a sequence arguing superiority over Moses to the start of a passage arguing superiority over Aaron.

The passage we are looking at is the climax of a series of warnings against an "evil, unbelieving heart" (3:12). The author emphasises this through a repetition of a quote from Psalm 95, gradually focusing in on the phrase, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." At the start of chapter 4 this is placed in the context of "entering his rest", a theme that resonates with the reading from Mark.

There is a distinct contrast in tone between the cold steel of God's judgement (4:12-13) and the more sympathetic judgement of Jesus (4:14-16). The exhortations here are of a much more positive tone, telling us to "hold fast to our confession" and "approach the throne of grace with boldness". Christ understands our weakness and the mercy and grace we may receive contrasts with the prior harsh judgement.

This is a passage which gives us permission to change our ways. As we are challenged to increase our awareness of the poverty in our communities and to explore how we can respond to that we need to be aware of where we might previously have fallen short in this regard. However, that doesn't mean we have to fear judgement if we are now softening our hearts. It is in not responding that we face the greatest threat because we know that we will ultimately be laid naked and bare before God.

[Mark 10:17-31](#)

In many ways this passage obviously connects to a "Challenge Poverty" theme. It has teaching from Jesus about laying aside worldly possessions and concludes with the famous quote, "the first will be last, and the last will be first." It would be easy to look at it and say that those in poverty are the last and God will make them the first and everyone else should be aspiring to poverty. But is it really that simple?

This encounter with the rich man is replicated in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. The description of him changes slightly in each, but his request is the same, an almost urgent plea of "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

There are a number of interesting points about Jesus' response. Firstly, that the commandments He initially lists relate to interactions with others rather than with God, but that this is not enough. It is not purely the material we are concerned with here but also the spiritual. That is reflected in Jesus' follow up as well; not just to sell all you have and give it to the poor, but then to follow Him. Material poverty in itself is not enough for eternal life and the primary call here is to discipleship.

There is also a key moment before Jesus responds to the rich man for a second time: Mark says that "Jesus loved him" (something not repeated in Matthew or Luke). This is an echo of the greatest commandments of loving God and neighbour. Jesus obeys in His love for the rich man and yet the rich man cannot give up all he possesses and follow Jesus. He cannot put love of man before love of things.

The disciples also struggle to understand when Jesus explains further, a theme that is consistent with many of the passages that precede this one. However, it is worth spending time on the question of why wealth makes it difficult to enter the kingdom of God and what that means in today's society. Is it wealth in and of itself that is the problem or is it the consequences that are problematic?

Sermon ideas

Some of the readings from the lectionary this week highlight the tension between an individual or a structural response to poverty. While the first of these is important, we are called to the second as well. That may mean engaging with issues that are seen as overly “political”; for example job centre closures or benefits. However, just because an issue may be controversial doesn’t mean we should shy away from talking about it in church or in the wider society.

There are a number of quotes you may like to use.

- “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” (Dom Hélder Câmara)
- “I don’t know which Bible people are reading when they say that religion and politics don’t mix.” (Desmond Tutu)

One of the themes that emerges from Psalm 22 and from Job is lament. This is a key mode of spiritual expression that we often skip over but we can use these texts as ways to learn its vocabulary. In both cases there is a sense that the writer has done nothing to deserve the ills they are complaining about. This connects with the feeling of many who suffer from poverty that nothing they do will make any difference, but their situation is due to circumstances beyond their control and the decisions of others.

It is important we don’t think about “the poor” in a patronising way. People in the most deprived areas are not defined by poverty and very often these are some of the places with the strongest sense of community – these are “good places to be”. Many people in a Priority Areas context would identify with the story of the Widow’s Offering (Mark 12/Luke 21), where those who appear to have the least have the greatest generosity.

When we “other” the poor we also fail to recognise those among us suffering from poverty. The “[Deprivation Stats](#)”, which can be found via [Church Finder](#) show that poverty and deprivation exist in every parish. Some of it may be hidden, such as fuel poverty among pensioners, or the cost of accessing services in remote rural areas.

It would be good to engage the congregation in an interactive way to see whether their perception of the poverty in the parish is the same as the reality. One way to do this could be to choose a number of the SIMD indicators (see Introduction) and ask people to vote on which they think ranks highest. This could be done through a show of hands, or you could be creative and find a visual way of doing it (for example ping pong balls in glass jugs).

Once you have voted share what the statistics tell you about the parish and prepare some questions about how the congregation might respond to issues around the indicators which rank highest. It's more important to start a conversation and help the congregation think through their response than to come with a ready-made project to propose to them.

Time with children

Put on a large backpack and tell the children you are ready and raring to run a marathon. Ask if they see any problems with how you are prepared; with a backpack full of water, food and extra clothing, and get a bit of a discussion going around what you need and how heavy their school bag is. Explain that it would be really hard to run a marathon with a backpack because all the weight would slow you down. It might even stop you from crossing the finishing line.

Take off the backpack, and tell the children we have to travel light when we run a marathon and it is just the same when we run our Christian race as well. Describe how Jesus said to a rich man, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). Have the children guess what the rich man did and maybe get some discussion around what they would do. Read the answer, which was that "he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions" (v. 22).

Print out a camel and a needle, ensuring the camel is bigger and ask them to try to fit the camel through the needle. Reiterate the importance of letting go of possessions and traveling light, whether we are running marathons or running the race to eternal life with God.

Prayers

God, we come to You this morning invigorated, tired, hopeful, questioning.
We come to You as people in Your Kingdom,
looking for ways to love more deeply and care more intentionally.
We come to You with a variety of gifts, abilities, and interests.
Energise us to give ourselves and our gifts fully to our communities.
Teach us to be more like Jesus by finding ways to take what we have and multiply it. Allow
us to find unconditional love for our neighbours,
so that we can provide for them in ways that are unexpected and profound.

Encourage us to go beyond discussions about money and logistics,
and focus on our goal of serving You.

Prophets of a Future Not Our Own

Written by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision.*

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's
work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always
lies beyond us.*

*No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.*

This is what we are about:

*We plant seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.*

*This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.
Amen*

The following prayer is based on the song "Jesus Christ is waiting" (#360 in CH4) and can be used with one verse of the hymn being sung after each stanza of the prayer. It is helpful for the musicians to play the tune once before the prayer as an introduction so that people become familiar with the tune. It is also possible to omit the sung response and just to use the stanzas as a standalone prayer.

Lord Jesus Christ

Born in a shed, child refugee, friend of the outcast, political prisoner
We ask You to give strength and companionship to people who have no-one else to turn to
Be with those in our own community who struggle with loneliness
And in the midst of our busy lives, help us find time to connect with them

One: Jesus Christ is waiting

All: Jesus Christ is waiting... (sung)

There is so much wrong in the world: poverty, violence, greed, hunger and much more
We ask You to be a light in the darkness, bringing hope where none exists
Walk alongside those who fight injustice, and carry those who can't go on
Help us keep the fires of justice burning in our own hearts, never accepting the status quo

One: Jesus Christ is raging

All: Jesus Christ is raging... (sung)

We all suffer from ill health at some point, be it physical, mental or spiritual
We ask You to bring healing and comfort to those who are struggling right now
Help us do our part in caring for those around us
As we give thanks for those who devote their life to a ministry of healing

One: Jesus Christ is healing

All: Jesus Christ is healing... (sung)

In a world where power is abused and suspicion breeds fear
We ask for the courage to be bold in the face of hatred
Help us to stand with those who are oppressed
And to show that goodness and love are stronger than evil

One: Jesus Christ is dancing

All: Jesus Christ is dancing... (sung)

As we reflect on the many challenges that we and our community face
Help us to recognise the gifts that we have to offer in tackling poverty
We ask for guidance in understanding how we are called to service
And help us to be bold if it means stepping out of our comfort-zone

One: Jesus Christ is calling

All: Jesus Christ is calling... (sung)

Musical suggestions

- CH 258 – “When the hungry who have nothing” – One of the few songs from Spain to become widely sung in English speaking churches, it focuses on God accompanying us in difficult times.
- CH 259 / MP 806 – “Beauty for Brokenness” – An intercessory song which names many issues in the world and asks God to help us respond.
- CH 291 – “When out of poverty is born” – Kingsfold is often sung in a slow four but feel it in a two to capture the hope behind this text.
- CH 362 – “Heaven shall not wait” – A call to action, sing with a sense of urgency.
- CH 509 – “Jesus call us! O’er the tumult” – A hymn which speaks of calling, v.3 is particularly relevant to the reading from Mark.
- CH 543 / MP 1201 – “Longing for Light
A sending song with each verse asking God to “make us” into signs of the kingdom.

- CH 544 – “When I needed a neighbour were you there” – The use of first person makes this distinctive, consider having vv1-5 sung by soloists and singing v6 together as a commitment to action.
- CH 550 / MP 37 – “As the deer pants for the water” – Inspired by Psalm 42 and speaks in v2 of God being more satisfying than gold or silver.
- MP 1251 – “Simple living” – This song highlights some of Jesus’ teaching around simple living, including the passage from Mark.
- “God of the Bible” (Tony Alonso/Shirley Erena Murray) – An upbeat, catchy song well worth learning which explores the faithfulness of God through the hardship and joys of life.

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