

## **‘Pray Remember the Poor’**

Readings: Galatians 2: 1 – 10 & Matthew 6: 1 - 4

Well something I often wonder about when I walk into St Laurence’s is that inscription cut into one of the pillars at the back of the church which says: ‘Pray Remember the Power.’ It’s something you can’t miss when you walk into the building?

Now I know the inscription is generally understood to mean: ‘pray remember the poor’ as there’s an ancient poor box very close to it. But I often wonder whether it actually means what it says: ‘Pray Remember the Power’ calling us to remember the power we have in Christ when we invite the Holy Spirit into our lives or to come amongst us as God’s people in this place. And I quite like to read it both ways.

However, I only mention all that because my attention was drawn to a little phrase in our first reading. And the significance of it had not really struck me before - even though I’d read it very many times. And it was this which started me thinking about the inscription at the back again. And it’s the little phrase in the verse which says: ‘All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor.’ Well who knows but, maybe whoever cut that inscription into the stone all those hundreds of years ago had those words from Paul’s letter in mind.

And so why does Paul mention this in his letter to the Galatians? Well what Paul is describing is a time he and his companion Barnabas were in Jerusalem as part of a famine relief mission. And as they were there Paul was keen to meet up with the Apostles based in the city so that he could lay before them the gospel he had been preaching in his mission to the non-Jewish world – the essence of which is that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus and not by any efforts of our own. And this wish to meet up with the other apostles was not because he had any personal doubts or misgivings about what he was preaching and teaching.

It was because Paul instinctively knew it would be helpful for him to have the blessing of the Jerusalem apostles for what he was doing. And the reason for this is that there were some troublemakers who were forever dogging his footsteps and seeking to undermine his authority by trying to make out he was preaching a different gospel to that of the other apostles. And it was a serious matter – as, in effect, the truth of the gospel was at stake. He knew that if those who were opposing him were to succeed, the Church could have been stifled at birth and never moved much beyond a small part of the Middle East - and we would not be here today.

And so what Paul is saying in his letter is that the Jerusalem apostles gave him the ‘right hand of fellowship’ in other words they recognised they had all been entrusted with the same gospel. They were happy with his message. And ‘all they asked’ he goes on to say is ‘that we continue to remember the poor.’ And as this was something that he and his friends had been doing for the previous twenty years, it’s not surprising he says “well that’s the very thing I was eager to do.” And you can almost detect the note of surprise in his voice that they should even ask: “Of course we shall be doing that – it’s what we’ve been doing for years and why we are here.”

And like Jesus, these leaders of the early church knew poor people. They lived with the needy and the overwhelmed. They prayed for them by name. They knew them because they were involved with them. The Church was overflowing with those who did not have enough to eat, and every day the apostles visited, counselled and prayed with them. And because showing the compassion of Jesus to those who were broken was such vital a part of their

daily ministry, I suppose it was only natural that when the time came to extend the gospel to other parts of the world this is what they would ask Paul to continue to do - and which he always did following the example of his Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Pray, remember the poor. And Jesus knew what it was like to be poor - as he was poor. He was born in a borrowed manger, he preached from a borrowed boat. He entered Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. He ate the Last Supper in a borrowed upper room and he was buried in a borrowed tomb and he had to borrow a coin to illustrate a point about paying taxes. He owned very little in the way of material things and when he died, the only item he possessed of any value was his robe.

Pray, remember the poor. The poor, the marginalised, the outcasts, those on the fringes of society; they were all very close to the heart of Jesus. Time and again Jesus made it clear that he had come for those living in the shadows: the broken, the bad, the bound, the lost the hurting and the poor. 'I am here to seek and restore those who are lost' he says.

He went out of his way to befriend these who no one else wanted to know - or to be even seen with. If we'd been there, we would have often found him seated around a table with them and just chilling out. They liked spending time with him as he gave them hope. But the Pharisees, who considered themselves to be the respectable members of society at the time were aghast at it all as they regarded those who Jesus was befriending and hanging out with as sinners.

The Pharisees, by the way, were the spiritual teachers of the day but what they failed to understand was the love of God and his compassion for the poor and the marginalised.

Well let me tell you now about a man called David Ruis as I have been reading his book 'The Justice God is Seeking' and it's challenged me no end these last few weeks. David is a Canadian Vineyard pastor and songwriter living in Los Angeles. And I've come across his name a number of times over the years as I'm familiar with a number of his songs which are widely sung across the church. And I notice that, at least one, of them is in the hymnbook we have here in St Laurence's.

I was also aware that he was someone with a passion for the poor and that he, and those around him are very much involved in church planting within inner city areas amongst the poorest of the poor and in places where many of us would probably be afraid to go. But not only does David engage with the poor but, following the example of Jesus, he goes out of his way to make friends with them. And that is with friends who many of us would probably wish to avoid.

But there's also an interesting little detail I came across about David that's worth mentioning in the present context - as he has a tattoo on his right arm consisting of three words - 'Remember the Poor.'

Well let me just read a short extract from his book. And it picks up where he and a colleague are taking a short break at a cafe across from their ministry centre. This is what he says:

'The place was a bit of a dive, but we loved the food. It was right across from our ministry centre...Some friends had just left, and my good friend Jan and I were sitting on the same side of the booth chatting and nursing our coffee just a little longer.

Someone plonked down across from us. Startled we looked over to see someone from the streets whom we had never laid eyes on before. He was a bit snarly - and a lot tipsy.

“We’ve been watching you,” he blurted out. “We’ve been watching you for quite some time now. And you know what? We’re starting to believe that you actually like us. Lots of programmes down here, lots of ways to get food and some clothes....you need your religious system, and we know how to work it. But something’s different about you guys...we think you actually care about us.”

Jan and I sat there with our mouths hanging open.

“You’re good soldiers,” he continued. “You’re good soldiers. Keep it up.”

Then he got up and walked out of the restaurant, leaving our eyes glistening with tears and our hearts challenged.”

You know I’m full of admiration for the ministry of people like David Ruis and others such as the Catholic theologian, Jean Vanier who I read died only a little over a week ago. Most of us are probably a very, very long way from being able to do anything like what they do. But as followers of Jesus we are still called to follow the Master’s example and remember the poor.

And we don’t have to look very far to come across those who are poor and needy in our world some of which we have been hearing about this morning in what Chris has been sharing with us.

‘Pra remember the poor’ and if we are inclined to forget, we always have that constant reminder each time we walk into this building and see that inscription on the pillar at the back. ‘Pray Remember the Poor.’ Amen

Philip Newell (Reader)

Sermon preached at St Laurence’s, Scalby at a service of Morning Worship on Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> May 2019 (Christian Aid Sunday)