

Good news to the poor?

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I've occasionally used my own novel way of achieving church unity: ask a congregation to vote for whether they are rich, poor or in between – and I guarantee in most Baptist churches you will get a solid vote for 'in-between'! After all, everyone knows that in a global context our access to clean water, sanitation, food and healthcare puts us firmly into the wealthier segment of the population.

But then we all know someone richer than us – they sit in church with their larger house, their bigger car, their winter cruise holiday. I have a vivid memory of preaching in a parish church in Hampshire where one member of the robed choir that had just delivered a magnificent *Magnificat*, (“the rich He has sent away empty”) rushed past me at the door to jump into his Rolls for the journey home.

So what exactly does it mean for us to sit in middle class comfort on a Sunday morning and celebrate our relationship with Jesus, the one who announced his presence as “good news to the poor”? If we are not poor, how can we discover for ourselves – and share with others – the gospel which is good news to the poor?

I fully recognise that there is, of course, a spiritual dimension to this. Whatever my material wealth, I can only receive Christ when I recognise my spiritual poverty: I'm old enough to have sung “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling.” This suggests a truth we too often fail to recognise – it is hard for the rich to enter the Kingdom partly because the more we have the harder it gets to admit that our wealth has its limitations: money can't buy me love, and that includes God's love.

As a provocative aside, I think this is one reason why men are outnumbered in our churches: masculinity in our culture is not usually associated with publicly expressing complete inadequacy. The same reality may explain the difficulty of mission in Europe, a continent in which wealth and an attitude of intellectual superiority go hand-in-hand.

So our beatitude of choice is Matthew's “*Blessed are the poor in spirit*” because we can see how we might qualify for blessing; Luke's “*Blessed are the poor*” seems to leave us out in the cold. It's worth noting that the theological explanation for this apparent disparity – that seems so glaring to us in our society, in which poverty is usually interpreted purely as an economic matter – probably lies in the consistent biblical understanding that poverty is the result of sin: “*there should be no poor among you...if only you fully obey the Lord your God*” (Deuteronomy 15:4).

Thus people who are poor are oppressed; they are sinned against as much as they are sinners. That's why the gospel is good news – it sets them free (“*to set at liberty those who are oppressed*” Luke 4:19). Even more strikingly, one of the ways the gospel becomes good news to the poor is because it sets the rich free from sin and they cease to be oppressors. Isn't that the force of the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19)? When he met Jesus his life was not the only one transformed; those he had exploited and oppressed were repaid – generously – and their lives were also transformed.

But this has not always been the reality. Church on Sunday followed by a week of ruthless exploitation: that, sadly, is too accurate a caricature for comfort in too many locations and historical periods. And, vitally, this has been a stumbling-block to the gospel and the mission of the church.

This is why I continue to argue, year-after-year: being a Fairtrade church, a Jubilee Congregation, signing up to the Micah Challenge – these are not optional extras for those who like that kind of thing; they reveal the reality of a gospel that is good news to the poor.

So that's the challenge. Is the gospel we present – by our words and actions – one that is good news to the poor because it changes our attitudes to wealth and poverty? Are we willing to be good news to those in our locality that we find it most difficult to relate to because they are not 'people like us'?

Years ago Mainstream helped me do a survey about church attitudes to justice and poverty. It revealed that evangelical churches were less likely to preach about these issues than 'liberal' churches. The question is: does that demonstrate that liberals have a social gospel or that evangelicals are rather less biblical than they like to think?

Perhaps you can cope with one more rhetorical question: do we prefer to adapt the gospel to our culture to make it more acceptable, or ensure that it is as true and counter-cultural in a world obsessed with wealth and celebrity as it was two thousand years ago?

Because let's face it – we are in a minority. The global church is now predominantly made up of people who are poor – as will heaven be: the gospel really is good news to the poor!