

GOD'S PRIORITY FOR THE POOR



By Greg Valerio



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GOD'S PRIORITY FOR THE POOR

THE JESUS MANTRA

Be aware of your need of God,
Mourn for your generation
and the indignities that it will suffer
Be humble in your dealings with the world,
Recognising that you are not the answer to life's problems,
But hunger and thirst after a good lifestyle
That demonstrates God's love and justice,
And you will know what it means to find a purpose in life.

Show kindness, mercy and compassion to all people
Because this is what we all need,
As God can only reflect
through those that have a pure heart.
Be reconcilers and peacemakers,
Because this is what will show people
that you are a child of God.
And be prepared to be misunderstood
by your friends and enemies
If you pursue peace, justice and reconciliation
in your generation.

Introduction.

As I write this paper I am staying at Sahara – a rehab community in the heart of Delhi that works with drug users, vulnerable women, children, those that have been illegally trafficked and people living with HIV/Aids. It is a community dedicated through the love of Christ to rebuilding the lives of the people society rejects. For me it is a home from home, a place where the poorest, the wretched, the self-destructive can come and receive Christ's love through the dedication of the team who run the programs. It is a genuine community run by the poor for the poor. Here the poor find hope, the wretched find meaning and the self-destructive learn to care for others. A truly inspirational place that is more than a project, it is the life of God at work in the world.

In the fifteen years I have been working with and amongst the poor, I have discovered through my own blind prejudices and tears of grief and joy that God is the God of the Poor and his love for them is so great that he has inseparably bound up his person with them. He truly does live with them and this identification with the poor is perhaps the greatest challenge that the western church faces.

I have come to believe through observation and biblical reflection that Christ lives with the poor by preference and it was this discovery some fifteen years ago that caused me to totally re-evaluate my entire faith.

As someone who had become a follower of Christ (I prefer this term as the word Christian is for me to political) through the charismatic house church in the UK, I discovered over a period of time that I had been disciplined in a privatised/personalised faith system that did not prepare me for the radical call of Christ in the Poor and my social responsibility to the world and God's creation.

The notion that Christ lives with the poor by preference and the rich by invitation was as offensive to me at the time of discovery as it no doubt will be to some of my readers now. "Surely God loves everyone equally?" I asked and of course he does. God's love is a burning reality ablaze across creation and is focussed on every human being and creature that lives and breathes this very day. Yet that perfect love means perfect justice and it therefore makes different demands of us all. As I

re-read the story of Christ in the pages of scripture I began to understand that believing in Jesus and keeping my personal excesses (of which I still have many) in check was not the main point of what Jesus taught. I had to believe in the things that he believed in and to do the things that Jesus did. Or put another way,

“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 John 3 v18).

It remains a daily challenge as I seek to follow Christ at the beginning of the 21st century.

This prayer (written in the form of a paper) is not a rant against organised religion or the financial excesses of the church, although, we will be looking at some of these issues a little later on. Rather it is an attempt to address the simple reality that God has a priority for the poor and as followers of Christ, irrespective of our status in life ‘rich, poor, western, African, American, black, Asian, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant or someone who follows Christ from another faith’, we do not just have a religious duty before God to affirm the centrality of Gods justice for the poor of our world, but equally we should have a genuine desire built upon the relationship we have with Jesus to bend our lives in service to him through identifying with the poor as an act of worship towards God.

It is not my intention to rehearse the facts, figures and statistics available to back up my convictions of the political priority of the poor in this paper. We should all know by now the reality of the world we live in. If you do not you need to get out more and stop watching cheap TV that is programmed to dull the minds of the masses into ignorant mediocrity. The glaring disparity that exists between rich and poor, the concentration of the ‘power to change’ in a smaller number of hands, the devastation of our natural world and eco-systems due to the madness of material consumption and the drive for bigger corporate profits are all creating a crisis that our planet has never faced before. Our responsibility as followers of Christ therefore, is to ‘*proclaim the good news to the whole creation*’ (Mark 16 v15). My intention is to simply explore Jesus’ relationship with the poor and what our response should be as his dedicated followers.

It will no doubt leave many questions unanswered. As I am no university graduate or natural mystic able to probe the essence of the triune Godhead,

so my observation will primarily be rooted in my experience, my understanding of scripture and in the lives of the poor themselves. But I trust it will offer us a few insights into how we as western Christians who are by and large ‘not poor’ can take our place at the global table of Christ and connect with the cause of Christ, which is to see ‘Justice for the Poor’.

Christ and the Poor.

And Mary said, 'my soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and Holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.' (Luke 1 v46-55).

It has been said before and will no doubt be said many times in the future that the social, political, economic and religious climate surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ was no accident. God in all his eternal glory choose to enter the world as a poor person. The incarnation of God as a small baby was as much a part of Gods salvation plan for the world as His later death and resurrection. Let us recap; Jesus was conceived outside of wedlock to a poor virgin girl raising the spectre of a huge social scandal, in the back end of Galilee, a region under Roman Military and Imperial occupation, in a stable full of piss and shit during a time of increasing social upheaval, fomenting political violence against occupying forces, increasing tax burdens both legitimate and illegitimate, royal scandal and moral decadence, religious duplicity and complicity with the political powers of the day. In short this was a nation of people under immense pressure and struggling to come to terms with their identity as Gods chosen people. It is no great surprise that the poor of the day were crying out for liberation from the system that dis-empowered and oppressed them.

The specific circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth remain an amazing story. Born in a cattle shed, he was visited by illiterate shepherds, serenaded by angels and worshipped by wealthy kings from the East representing different faiths. The movements in the heavens all point to the significance of this child. His entrance into the world also provoked the neurotic jealousy of King Herod, who could not broker the idea of a rival to the throne and summarily ordered the genocidal execution of over

2000 children, thereby forcing Jesus' family to flee the country as refugees and settle in a foreign land until it was safe to return.

God, in the first few months of existence from conception to newborn, is making a very clear point with reference to our topic. He does not just have compassion on the poor or, in some liberal politically correct way, fight for the poor or campaign on their behalf. Nor does he subscribe to the neo-conservative 'pull yourself up by the bootstraps' ideology so prevalent in the West today. His simple birth plants him firmly as one of the Poor. This hit me like a silver bullet straight through the forehead! The God I worship and adore is poor. He has chosen to be poor and to suffer under a world system that is cynically dedicated to the idea of preserving a social, economic and power disparity in order to maintain the advantages that it affords the privileged of any age or generation. In every way God identifies with the poor and still does. His identification with the poor is unquestionable when viewed through the incarnational lens of the life of Jesus.

'The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.' (Luke 2 v40).

As Jesus grew up, trained as a carpenter, the cultural context of his day would have afforded him daily experience of what it meant to be poor, oppressed and marginalized. As a carpenter tradesman and, at some point, being head of a single parent household he would have worked tirelessly to earn enough to sustain the economic viability of his mother and siblings (I personally believe that Jesus did have brothers and sisters, so I trust my Catholic and Orthodox friends can forgive me and understand the social point I am trying to make here). He would have been forced to pay Roman Taxes, witnessed cruel landowners extorting money from landless peasants, watched his people being cruelly executed for daring to cry freedom with violence and lived through the toil of delivering daily bread to the table. In many ways the politics of the young Jesus would have been the politics of bread and survival: the day-to-day existence, care and concern for the well-being of his family friends and community.

Jesus' dedication to his religion is well documented throughout the pages of scripture, yet how much his burgeoning faith informed his understanding

of the social turmoil around him and how much the turmoil informed his faith is difficult to assess. I am sure that it would have been a mixture of the two. Yet clearly he was a man on a mission. He viewed God as his Father and would have heard the comments made about him, his family and his identity.

“There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eight-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At the moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel.” (Luke 2 36-38).

As I have reflected upon the formative years of Jesus' life I am struck by the balance that Jesus seemed to maintain in his life. His devotion to his Father in Heaven, to his family and his people and given the social upheaval that surrounded him I am amazed that there is no discontinuity in his life or message. He was not the victim of dualism and the endless discussions surrounding what we would call evangelism or social action. (which thankfully, we are seeing coming to and end in our churches). He did not see a separation between the spiritual and the material or engage in a polemic of asserting that one is more important than the other. Jesus' background led him to view life holistically and see that the invisible acts of compassion and mercy are as important as the grand gestures of hope and liberation. Indeed it is worth noting that our salvation is uniquely bound up with the redemption of society and our environment. There can be no fullness of life without the emergence of a society that reflects God's peace and justice. Life is holistic and the Kingdom of God is a holistic life.

Jesus, the Son of God and humanity chose the way of the poor as his grand entrance onto the world stage. His was the way of the faithful remnant of Israel waiting expectantly for its salvation – the way of humility. This truth became the foundational reality for me as I began to rebuild my faith in Christ away from a privatised Western spirituality into something, I trust, is more concrete and closer to the real Jesus.

The Public Life of Christ.

“When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ (Luke 4 16-21).

Jesus stands up in the synagogue and gave his maiden speech concerning his mission from the above passage in Isaiah 61. His declaration that, in him, this messianic and revolutionary scripture was fulfilled in him had a profound impact on those who were present. Some were deeply offended and proceeded to throw him out of the synagogue on the charge of blasphemy. Yet, others were listening to the man who was one of them and had grown up in their midst and were astounded to hear one of their own proclaiming a message of liberation and freedom that caused their hearts to burn with hope and expectation. To them this did not represent an intellectual statement of what others should be doing, or the political manifesto of someone aiming for office, but revealed the mission that Jesus intended to work out in his life. It was the life mandate that Jesus intended to embrace and to model for those around him: a clarion call for others to journey with him into the Kingdom of God which he saw as being a values led revolution. Freedom, liberty, healing, deliverance, the cancellation of debts and an end to the darkness that people were living in: in short, a reconnection with God and God’s purposes. It is here, as we see elsewhere in the Gospels, that the objectives of Jesus’ mission are clearly stated. These were the things that Jesus believed in and that he intended to live out during the remaining years of his life.

For the poor this would have been more than just an emotional personal conversion message to be responded to. It was a message aimed directly at their daily lives and sufferings and an opportunity for them to walk out of their misery and find consolation in their God in a tangible way. It is no

surprise, then, that the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed constantly surrounded Jesus. They saw in him the man who walked amongst them and lived out an ethic that gave a meaning and purpose to the misery that they were currently living in. If the politics of Jesus prior to his public life had been those of daily bread and survival, this public ethic became the politics of hope and transformation for all who chose to follow him.

I can hear the words of Jesus echoing down the centuries for us all: “You are no longer subjects of the religious orders who make God in their own image, the political tyrants and power brokers who spin the lie that true freedom is defined by a state-run legislator, whose only recourse in dealing with dissent is through the use of violence and coercion, and the economic institutions of extortion that define our humanity according to the value they place on the products they sell you. No, my friends, you are the subjects of God and you are called to live free from the shackles of these ideologies and structures and to use your freedom in service to those who are yet to find it”.

I began to realise the revolutionary nature of this message! It was not about a bit of social engineering, a tinkering with the political fringes of society to placate the disgruntled masses or create a consensus around the lowest common denominator, as so many of our politicians do. Equally, it was not a message of philanthropy; the giving of one’s assets to someone less fortunate than you whether motivated by guilt, compassion or social opinion and the placating of one’s conscience in the process. This was a transformatory message that radically rearranged one’s priorities and the priorities of life; that placed the poor at the heart of the gospel message. It was a message of love and justice, not charity.

“Therefore do not worry, saying ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or what will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today”.

(Matthew 6 v31-34)

This is amazing stuff given the context of the day and the people who were listening to the message

and witnessing the man living it out. Don't worry about your food, your clothes and fashion. If you have excess give it away. Give to Caesar what is due to him - namely nothing - love your enemy, do good to those that persecute you, love your neighbour in actions not words. Basically live as I live and you will inherit all that I am and that my Father gives me. The words echoed down to me from the mountain top and I thought "shit", this is serious, this is more than just morality, this is social, political, economic, cultural, spiritual transformation on an extraordinary level. If I actually live like this (which of course I still do not) it will have a really powerful impact on the world around me. Jesus seems to be deadly serious when he talks like this: there are no exceptions, no opt out clauses, no negotiating.

Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me". (Luke 9 v23)

How far the witness of the Church is from the person who founded it! The question then is 'how do we live in the reality of the life of Jesus?' This question, I believe, goes right to the heart of the crisis hitting the church in the West at the moment and the issue to which we now must turn.

The Priority of the Poor in Discipleship.

“Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. Yet when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, ‘Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.’ But Jesus aware of this, said to them, ‘Why do you trouble this woman? She has preformed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.’” (Matthew 26 v6-10).

Upstairs right now, men at different stages of drug rehabilitation are doing their morning devotions. Their deep lilting voices reverberate around Sahara House to the accompaniment of the drum and the guitar. They sing with hope and desperation. Hope at the prospect they will find freedom from their destructive addictions, desperate that God will lift them from the mire of their broken lives and help them find peace and forgiveness. Their worship is simple. Here they are: lives destroyed, families tortured and broken through their own self confessed stupidity and they sense that only through God can they find the path to restoration, to a life that will hold meaning and purpose. This worship is not about form, style or presentation; there is no entertainment factor in this twice-daily occurrence. It is for them about life and death. The vast majority of these men are not Christian, they are Hindus or Muslims and they come from a myriad of different ethnic backgrounds and traditions. Yet they daily confess Jesus has touched them through the rhythm of prayer, meditation, devotional worship and bible study.

They do not come to this place to get converted or become a Christian – they come because they are desperate to get off drugs. Yet many, but not all, with time discover what the disciples of Jesus discovered: that to be in the presence of God is a life changing experience and that the transformation that takes place comes from within so that they, too can declare with Peter:

“You are the Messiah, the son of the living God”. (Matthew 16 v16).

My assertion here is simple. Jesus did not come to found a world religion that has become known as Christianity. He came to bring transformation

for all of creation and the people that live in it, on behalf of the Father in Heaven. If this is true it has profound implications for the discipleship, mentoring and care of humanity and the creation around us.

Peter’s confession of Christ was not such a cosmic revelation (although it clearly was in one way) more a statement of the obvious truth that came about as a result of Peter living side by side Jesus for many months, perhaps years. Peter was reluctantly drawn to Jesus; was constantly guilty of getting the wrong end of the stick and over-reacting. Some would say he was hardly a stable guy! Certainly he showed no signs of being the rock upon which the early Church was to be built. Yet he came to realise through observing the life of Jesus - the way he dealt with the daily scenario’s of the poor, the rich, the outcasts and the miracles of healing, deliverance, creation miracles and Jesus’ continuity in his public and private life - that, like a pot being brought to the boil, ‘this is the man!’

I always imagine Peter’s mind working overtime as he listened to the words of Jesus bringing hope and life to thousands of people and having to process the emotion of his past life, the end of his profession, being forced to associate with people he would normally not have associated with. He gave up all that he was, in order to follow this man, believing him to be the chosen one of God, yet having to square this belief with what he thought the chosen one was supposed to be and how he should have behaved. This was probably all his religious dreams come true, yet an ethical and lifestyle nightmare!

For the modern-day follower of Christ the process is much the same. We choose to follow Christ because we come to a conviction that this person is God and has the answers and solutions to our personal difficulties. Yet we soon discover that the very same person makes completely unreasonable demands on our daily life that cannot be squared with what we have traditionally been brought up to believe about Jesus! My culture demands one thing and the Kingdom of Christ demands something that is completely the antithesis.

These demands that Christ makes upon us are the same today as they were in his day, and his way of life is a relevant to us today as it was back in 1st Century Palestine. For the man or woman

of God, the poor therefore play a unique role in following Christ. Jesus did not live a middle class life with all the socially acceptable norms and expectations of bettering oneself financially that seems to go with the territory. He was poor, deliberately poor. He lived alongside the poor and his message was shaped around their priorities for liberation. He expected as a matter of course, for his chosen disciples to do the same. Let's be brutally honest here: Jesus did not have an income; he made himself reliant on the income of his female followers (Luke 8 1-3), and the hospitality of his friends, the religious establishment and the common folk of the day. He ran a common purse from which he gave to the poor (John 13 v29). This is not the Christian form of giving that is conditional on what we perceive to be moral: i.e. 'I will not give money to a homeless person because they may spend it on things I do not approve of. He gave as he was asked with no preconditions (Luke 6 v30). I have never personally understood some Christians who attempt to occupy the moral high ground by dictating to another person how they should spend the money that should be a gift that is freely given. This attitude is offensive and patronizing to someone who is in a position of weakness and vulnerability.

I wrote the following reflection after meeting a beggar on my first trip to New York. I offered him a cup of coffee, but he refused, he just wanted someone to help him to walk the two blocks up Broadway to where he slept under cardboard boxes. He wanted company and he taught me much about Jesus in the process.

William Johnson III.

*William Johnson III - New York sucks
but we keep on sucking!
Gave you a dollar for your diabetes
and all I can do is watch you
- my man from Florida -
wander up W 46th street and settle down
into your cardboard box haze.
Donald Trump in his white phallus on
Limousine wheels drives by.
I'd rather be with you William Johnson III
from Florida Disney State sunshine paradise.*

*They cut your toe off William Johnson III
and left you to walk up Broadway.
- 'Yo! brother man from London -
you sniffed back the mucus and*

*grabbed my hand in your dirty one,
"When's the last time that you had a shower mate?"
I like your dirt it's real and alive.
As alive as the scream inside of me for your freedom!*

*William Johnson III - for three years
they have been sucking out
the marrow from your toes and
spitting it out because it doesn't taste of gold.
What shall I do William Johnson III?
The paradox is killing me.
Many thanks William Johnson III
- from Florida Disney State sunshine -
for blessing me, our two block walk
will resound in my eternity.*

The irony of this meeting for me was that as we walked and talked Donald Trump drove by in a white limousine. The paradox of the situation hit me hard. One of the richest men in New York no more than 20 feet away from one of the poorest! I instantly knew where Jesus would have been and where his allegiance would have been:

"Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry." (Luke 6 v24-25)

Jesus does not invest his time accumulating houses, mortgages, financial equities, inheritances (that are used to perpetuate the financial legacy of a family line) and pensions. Neither did he spend time on cultural niceties that have nothing to do with transforming society for the common good. Indeed his teaching concerning money and wealth remains hard hitting and applicable to all his disciples of whatever generation they may be. Give to all who ask, lend without expecting repayment, give away your possessions, cancel all debts, charge no interest, sell all you have and come follow me. Jesus firmly believed that money was not a personal possession to be disposed of or hoarded as an individual or institution saw fit, but rather that another human's need has priority over another person's wealth. Jesus did not engage in acts of pious charity, he lived out economic justice for the poor. This was not a popular message in Jesus' day and it is not a popular message today. In today's world the concept of giving your money away or dipping into your equity to benefit someone without the knowledge of a secure financial return is somehow seen as irresponsible or reckless. Yet I would argue that it is the ultimate act of financial responsibility because to do so is

to mirror the life of Christ. It is to recognise that all things material come from God, belong to God and return to God and that he has final demands on our wallet. God's priority for the poor means the economic redistribution of wealth to the poor.

How far the Church has come from the message of its founder, with its huge buildings, capital investments, share portfolios, pension schemes and vast acres of land! The Church Inc/plc has become everything that Jesus never was. It is time I believe for the followers of Jesus to call on the church to divest itself of all political power, financial wealth and constitutional privilege and invest its money into the poor and go and serve the poor as Christ did. To do so would restore public confidence in the moral integrity of its message and I believe people would begin to take the Church more seriously again. The public intuitively know this is what God wants; they just don't see it being modelled in the people who call themselves the people of God.

Earlier we heard the voice of Jesus in Matthew 26 refer to 'the poor always being with us'. This is not a fatalistic statement designed to give an excuse for not engaging with the poor rather it is a reality check for all followers of Christ who are walking the same path as Jesus. If, as Jesus did, we lived amongst the poor, executed economic justice, transformed broken lives through modelling hope, taught freedom and equality, did not indulge the powerful or pander to the privileged, rejected political office, did not support through silence the executing of state violence and in every way lived out an ethic of peace, justice and reconciliation in our lives and extended communities, we too would have the poor with us always. They would be attracted to our lives and message through the work of the Holy Spirit and we would be able to say with Luke,

"With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." (Acts 4 v33-35).

It is my conviction that new followers of Christ need to have this ethic modelled to them and that the leaders of the Church need to be leading by example. God has a priority for the poor and

so should his followers. We would be modelling the Kingdom of God on earth and many people would see a genuine alternative to the insipid soul-numbing way of the modern world. The fact that most churches do not have 'the poor with them always' is a sign of our corporate failure to deliver the message of Jesus Christ. We cannot serve both God and Mammon; we must decide.

Voluntary Poverty.

"If you can't feed a hundred, feed one." Mother Teresa.

As we sat in evening devotions at Sahara, we all sang simple songs to Jesus that night and took it in turns to speak briefly about our day. Everyone had a different reflection on the day, some had struggled, some had seen a breakthrough in their feelings, others had discovered that there was life beyond drugs, others had not. My reflection consisted of a coffee conversation with Joe: a 61-year old man who had been at Sahara for many years. His story is one of wasted opportunities and personal addictions that had destroyed the majority of his history. For him now, the most important thing is to spend a day living like Jesus. This simple challenge was presented to me by way of a question, as though I would have the answer to his quest. I was humbled that he thought I was so close to God that I would be able to help him on the road to being like Christ. The truth is, it was the other way round. His simple life and apparent poverty exposed the reality of the meaninglessness of my complicated life and how the world I live in attempts to strangle the very life of Christ through fear of what we cannot control and desire for what we do not yet possess. That evening Joe talked about how he had failed in his quest to be like Christ because he had not given his spoon to someone who had asked for it at dinner. For Joe this was a failing and he asked for Jesus' and the communities' forgiveness. To me this was sheer genius: the power of the cross over the selfish nature and a testimony to this man's saintliness that his day could revolve around a simple spoon. The simplicity of his life had sensitised him to the small yet beautiful nature of giving what we have when we are asked.

Delhi Prayers 3.

Hey Joe - we sit on Delhi mats - and pray to wash holy feet
and talk of grace, compassion and freedom.
Hey Joe - your 61 years of injustice-informs my soul of good things
and stories of triumph in the face of adversity.
Hey Joe - our discussions go soul to soul-and bang out the goodness
from the ruins of our lives.
Hey Joe, - you are a brother-who longs to live in peace...
peace be upon us-as we struggle to be men.

Of course my hypocrisy is there for all to see. We are all washed up on the same shore knowing there is no going back and yet unsure of how to shape the future. I am always encouraged by the notion that the future is not set; the bleak outlook we digest from the BBC and the national press is just one interpretation based upon a certain outlook of how the world is turning. It is not however the official one! Of course the doomsday scenarios can come true and some certainly will. As the following quote referring to climate change illustrates perfectly;

"This half century of deepening oil dependency would be difficult to understand even if oil were known to be in endless supply. But what makes the depth of the current global addiction especially bewildering is that, for the entire time we have been sliding into the trap, we have known that oil is in fact in limited supply. At current rates of use, the global tank is going to run too low to fuel the growing demand sooner rather than later this century. This is not a controversial statement. It is just a question of when".¹

The issue of climate change, the apocalyptic nature of its impact, our 'head-in-the-sand-keep-consuming' mentality is going to reap extraordinary consequences on our children's generation and the poor of our world. It may be time to build the ark so we are fully prepared, but that is a topic for another day.

When asked recently during a radio interview if I believed we could end poverty in a generation, I replied, 'of course I do, the question is do you?' The opportunity that Jesus through the Poor offers to us, is a way out of the cultural malaise that we currently live in and a fresh life to our spirit as we connect with the cause of Christ in our lifetime. It is an opportunity for us to dive headlong into a deeper relationship with God based upon the real commodity of faith not fortune. Yet it also creates a very real anxiety in us as the teaching of Christ always has: 'What if it does not work and I have got it wrong?'

The truth is that following Christ is a journey that takes an eternity to complete, so there is no immediate quick fix for us as we begin to look at the issue of voluntary poverty. Whether you are the richest person in the world or the poorest fool, Christ's calling to us is the same: 'Come follow me.' I have witnessed soulless selfishness in the rich and

¹ Jeremy Legget 'What they don't want us to know about the coming oil crisis'. The Independent 9th February 2006.

the poor as well as abundant generosity from the same. So this is not a call to romanticise poverty or to elevate the poor onto a pedestal and make those who are not poor feel guilty. It is, however, a call to accept that the way of Christ is the correct way to live. It is also a call that should spark a genuine debate among us that, hopefully, will lead us closer to the truth that Jesus was poor and that the poor play a central role in salvation history. Now I do believe that the poor have a distinct advantage in this matter as they do not have very much to give up and therefore have a head start – yet for those of us who are not poor and who live in a society that has institutionalised the idea that wealth and privilege is a divine right, we need to begin to strip back the onion layers - crying as we do – until we get to the core of what Christ demands of us in relation to the poor.

As I journey with God towards his priority for the poor I have faced a myriad of challenging questions and contradictions that I still face on a daily basis. There are, I believe, three simple things at the heart of voluntary poverty that form the foundations of this way of life. They are Prayer, Simplicity and Love and Justice. Of course in saying this, what I am not saying is this is the way it should be done. These thoughts do not represent some sort of awful Christian self-help book designed to give us the ten points to being like Jesus! No one can be like Jesus, we can only be ourselves and allow Christ to transform us into the unique people that we are. However, these are principles and values I have found very helpful in my own journey and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, they can inform our lives and transform us into radical agents of personal and social transformation.

Prayer (confession-reflection-action)

There is nothing profound in saying prayer, yet it this simple practice that creates within us the space, dependency, humility and poverty of spirit we need to inherit the earth. The meek really will inherit the earth as their numbers increase daily and the power to rule and dominate the earth's resources is concentrated in the hands of a dwindling minority. The practice of prayer is not primarily a stylistic thing. Rather a discipline of conversing with God. I do not pray that God will change the world around me rather I pray that God may change me so that I may be His partner in transforming the world to reflect his glory.

For some it is silence, for some it is noise, for others it is constant conversation or the discipline of reading scripture and reflecting upon the impact it may have on one's life. Perhaps the highest form of prayer is the agony of crying out in faith as we share in the mystical sufferings of Christ, either in our own life or vicariously on behalf of others (Philippians 3 v10).

I grew up in the tradition of charismatic evangelicalism that regularly held long and loud prayer meetings, flowing in the gifts of the Holy Spirit that were culturally channelled into a specific format. These helped the individual to receive those gifts and participate in challenging the powers and principalities of this dark-age to move over and let us through. It laid a healthy foundation in my spirituality of activism and forcefulness that I still live in the good of to this day. Yet I have increasingly come to realise that you cannot exorcise these powers in the world unless you are first free of them yourself. I remember a meeting of some eight hundred 18-24 year olds where I was asked to present a short piece on our work with the poor in Ethiopia. I made the connection between our affluence and consumption as a contributing factor to the poverty of the poor and challenged them to identify materialism as one of the biggest enemies in our walk with Christ. The leaders of the meeting called the congregation to pray against the principality of materialism and to break its power in the world. They all struggled to pray for this for even a single minute. When I suggested that we should not be praying against something but repenting of our materialism, the meeting was quickly moved on and so was I.

Jesus created space to pray, rising early in the morning when the glory of each new day was fresh to talk to his Father. His prayer was public discourse as part of his public life, it was one-to-one as he prayed for the sick, and it was the agony of all-night vigils in the desert of temptation or in the Garden of his betrayal. But, most of all, it was a daily rhythm that connected him in his humanity to his Father in heaven from whom he drew strength and wisdom to fulfil his mandate of incarnating the Kingdom of God. Prayer should create for us the well from which drink and therefore requires times set-aside for us to do just this. More recently I am discovering the beauty of prayer in stillness, solitude and contemplation. The rhythm of confession, reflection and action has helped me to realise that I need changing first, I need God to sensitise me to

himself as I confess my myriad of sins so I can hear his voice and walk in the goodness of Christ. I then reflect upon this and ask how can I apply this to my life to the benefit of serving Christ in the poor and finally take action to test whether what I believe I have heard and reflected on actually works or is just a heavy cheese fantasy.

By creating space for God to transform us delivers us from a work ethic, which says I can do it for God as though somehow God is indebted to us and forces us to become dependent on him. It creates within us a thirst for righteousness that will fire us like flaming arrows into the market place to challenge and transform the world we live in. Of course, prayer is not just a private thing. It is a corporate act as well. Together we share in the Body of Christ through confession, Eucharistic communion and our shared activity or mission. What can be more pleasing to God than a body of people who live like His son Jesus Christ and work for the liberation of the poor and the transformation of our society? This is our prayer, our very lives together living as Jesus intended.

Simplicity.

I am delighted that the art of 'living a simple life' is clearly back on the agenda. Although very much a middle class preoccupation in its current popular form as portrayed on television and through specialist magazines, its relevance to the issue of voluntary poverty and that of being more like Christ is at the heart of the gospel incarnation. Of course, it never went away for many Christian communities like the Benedictines, Franciscans and many of the Celtic spirituality movements and other religious orders. These communities offer us a window into how genuine Christ-like communities can express their faith in Christ in a way that is more wholesome than the materialistic complicitness of much of the mainstream church.

However I do not intend to say too much in this section on Simplicity as Ruth Valerio, my wife, has already addressed with much greater detail and diligence the issue of Simplicity in a previous Cred Paper entitled "Simplicity. Living life to the full". So many of my comments below are purely a snapshot of her work.

At the heart of simplicity or simple living is the idea of stripping back the excesses in one's lifestyle

or household community that contaminates or interferes with our relationship with God with one another and with the rest of creation. As we begin to walk the way of the simple life we begin to discover the excesses of our lives whether that is material consumption, stress through overwork, the isolation that a nuclear/privatised lifestyle brings and how our time is consumed or wasted on pursuing things that bring no value to one's existence or those around you.

The panorama of opportunity that the idea of simplicity offers us is endless. It gives us more time to invest into our relationships, less stress, healthier diet, a more wholesome environment for our children... The list can be endless as we discover that there is a profound wisdom in choosing the simple life as it better reflects the life of Christ and brings us a step closer to walking in his footsteps. This process takes time and is therefore best understood as a journey we take towards living like Christ. This journey is challenging and dependent upon us breaking out of a privatised existence and beginning to experiment with different forms of community based upon shared values.

I personally owe much to my wife Ruth who has pursued this agenda with a real zest and with some considerable eccentricity. Chicken cooperatives, pig farming, local organic vegetable boxes, food co-operatives, local allotments, eco-tricity, chemical free toiletries, a bathroom full of magazines that makes sitting on the toilet a truly political experience as you discover that your washing machine is in fact persecuting some remote tribe in Burma... trust me this is just the tip of the iceberg! Yet what I can testify to is that these issues have been pursued not only as an act of worship to God, but they have helped to shape the lives and values of friends and forged genuine community amongst peers. Pursuing simplicity of lifestyle has helped to nurture our values of peace, justice and social transformation that I trust others, both followers of Christ and those that are not, have been impacted by.

Love and Justice.

“Communion, which is the nature of the Trinity, means a critique of all kinds of exclusion and non-participation that exist and remain in society and also in the churches. It also encourages the changes needed for communion and participation to be present in all realms of social and religious life. The blessed Trinity represents the best program for full liberation”² Leonardo Boff.

The dynamic mystery of God is that she is perfect Trinity. Three persons in one being, one person expressed in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is a perfect reflection of how community should be, all its parts flowing together and working for each other so they are uniquely distinct but yet without distinction. This is an expression of perfect love upon which is built the ultimate revelation that God is Love. It took me a long time to work out the significance of God being Trinity outside of the bland creedal statements that have no ethical application. It is this harmonious relationship that Jesus displayed with His Father during his life that the Holy Spirit imparts to us now and forever. It is this inner sanctuary of God that we are now called to mirror as we walk in the footsteps of Christ in creating a world where there is no injustice, no inequality and where humanity finds its individual genius and its collective responsibility. It is this very Tri-une nature of God, woven into the fabric of creation, that is assaulted when a sin is committed, an injustice perpetrated and a deliberate offence is delivered.

So, as we journey towards Christ and the Poor, the Trinity begins to play an increasingly important role in our understanding of what kind of world we are called to create among ourselves. The Trinity offers us a way of engaging with society based upon the eternal peaceable and harmonious nature of who God is. This is why Jesus refused the way of violence when the opportunity arose (Matthew 26 v25) because it was contrary to the very essence of who God is, as there is no violence within God. Violence and vengeance is not an option for the follower of Christ in any circumstance, as it has no place in the Kingdom of God or in the eschatological future that we are destined to inherit as his followers. It is the way of love: Love your enemy, love those who persecute you, forgive an offence because, as we do, we expose the lie and misappropriation of power that the world system perpetuates and hopefully, in doing so, we

can win over our enemy to the way of Christ. Love precedes all and we are called to love in actions and in deeds. The love of God is the seedbed of his just nature and should be the motivation for any activity we engage in when approaching issues of poverty and injustice.

As a man prone to raging against the machine, however righteous I believed my anger was as I campaigned for human rights, marched against war, advocated for the poor to politicians, spoke out against outrageous working conditions and the corporate exploitation of the poor, I realised this was insufficient to secure the legacy of the Kingdom of God unless it was rooted in a genuine love for the person or the institution that was perpetrating the injustice. Love always precedes justice and justice is the sharp end of our public witness as men and women of Christ. God’s love is not retributive, but redemptive. Surely this is why we love our enemies: the desire to see them won over to the way of Christ means we must treat them in a way that affirms their humanity however inhumane their behaviour may be. This does not mean we ignore the injustice they may be perpetrating, but it does mean we do not perpetrate a second injustice in order to coerce them to change.

“An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind”
Mahatma Gandhi.

God is a just God because he is a loving God and he abhors the fact that the perfect community he so desired out of love to create (namely the universe) has been fractured and broken and no longer reflects His perfect nature. This, I believe, is the Kingdom mandate Jesus came to inspire. A re-ordering of a world built upon the foundation of the perfection present in His relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and it is into this relationship that a person is catapulted when they confess Christ and choose to walk in his footsteps. So, our very actions, our cause, our campaigning, our lifestyles, our communities, our environment, our very lives themselves must work towards the restoring of right relationships that mirror the perfection that is The Holy Community of the One God. It is to these points of social, personal and environmental breakdown that God turns His attention and in doing so calls his body the church to do the same. The faceless, forgotten victims who suffer under the tremendous weight of the world’s injustices (namely the poor) are the

² Leonardo Boff. Holy Trinity, Perfect Community p115. *Orbis* 1988.

reason why God came as a poor man to suffer alongside them in order to demonstrate that there is a freedom that transcends even the most hopeless of circumstances. In Christ Jesus freedom is completed for all: freedom for the oppressed and freedom from the oppression of riches; freedom from the power that corrupts and freedom to serve the power of Christ to transform; freedom from a society that stereotypes and freedom to associate across our differences. It is "for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5 v1). The end result of love and justice is, I believe, a freedom to be like Christ through choice. By choosing the way of voluntary poverty as an act of identifying with the poor, we are exercising our freedom in Christ to pursue his agenda in his way and eschewing the world's agenda to rule and to dominate.

Conclusion.

I have just returned from spending the afternoon at one of Sahara's outreach programmes to transsexual, transgender and eunuchs in the heart of East Delhi. They are the poorest of the poor, the lowest of the low, are outcasts in their society, tortured in their own identities, drug addicts, prostitutes, culturally manipulated, HIV +. They suffer the derision of Indian society and suffer the ultimate indignity of being ignored and overlooked. We sat with them and listened to the horrific tales of rape, begging, destitution and other unimaginable atrocities that are meted out on them and yet were moved by their gentleness, care for each other and their desire to see the programme extended beyond the small clinical services and six-bed hospice service that Sahara is currently able to offer. Their hospitality was fantastic and as we talked we discovered the love of God being poured out and welling up from within this community the world refuses to acknowledge. Their desire to share the goodness they have tasted through the work of Sahara with other transgender people was their most earnest concern and their great act of selflessness. As we closed our time together by praying and blessing each other we parted as friends. I have met Christ in the poor today and hopefully I will meet him again tomorrow as I take the long walk to justice.

So the circle is complete. We started this prayer with Christ the poor man, who came to demonstrate that his poverty was deliberate and that the poor are the starting point for the coming of his Kingdom. We end up with the same assertion that God's Priority for the Poor is not optional but essential if we are to walk in the footsteps of Christ Jesus. The Father has placed the poor at the centre of his purposes for the world and when we serve the poor we are actually ministering to our Lord and saviour.

"Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me'". Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you naked and gave you clothing? And was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the King will answer them, ***'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are the members of my family, you did it to me'*** (Matthew 25 34-40)