

Good News to the Poor

Contrary to what we might prefer, Christianity is not a private religion. Believers have to believe in their heart first, naturally, but once they do, they are not to keep the good news to themselves but to share it. Peter wrote, "Do not be frightened. But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect... (1 Peter 3:14-15)."

Many of us tend to be frightened of sharing our faith, perhaps out of fear of rejection. However, people today suffer from a shortage of hope. One of the wonderful things about Christianity is that where the world thinks there is no hope, the believer knows there is. Sins can be forgiven; those that were scarlet can become as white as snow (Isa 1:18). Drug addiction, alcoholism, so-called incurable disease, even death are not grounds for despair when Jesus is given access. As the Psalm puts it, "We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped (Ps 124:7)." We do have a message which is really worth sharing.

This is not to say that God is always at the beck and call of believers. Quite the reverse; believers are to be ready to jump at his call. So it is always God's decision how and when he will rescue a person from their state. Christians today are not in a position to guarantee that God will rescue each individual from all their problems as and when they choose.

But having said that, Scripture is full of instances of his rescuing the poor and needy when they cry out, as in Psalm 18 for example. The impression given throughout the Bible is that God is always longing to rescue people (Ezek 18:23). It seems, then, that Christians can always offer hope to people.

If there is any blockage to receiving God's mercy, there will be some reason for it. Just to give one example, God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). Those who proudly presume to see God at work are unlikely to experience his power in the way they expect. Instead, God will probably allow them to trip up. They are heading for a fall, as was written long ago (Prov 16:18). The timing of God's action is also uncertain. Job was finally rescued when he called on God, but he had to endure a long anguished wait first (Job 42:10,12).

Believers, then, are called to hold out hope to unbelievers, which is that Jesus is good news to those in need. Once again, we can expect opposition when we try to do so.

Over a nine month period, I gradually came to believe that God wanted us to open our church building to the homeless for an overnight stop. They would have shelter from the wind and rain, and if we could manage to provide it, hot food, access to toilets, mattresses, and maybe showering facilities. Perhaps we could provide them with pyjamas and sleeping bags, so that believers could take their clothes home, wash and tumble dry them overnight, and return them freshly ironed in the morning. The project need not be at all expensive. All we would need would be some extra finance to keep the boiler going, and enough volunteers to stay overnight to keep an eye on things. Maybe we could gather enough people to establish a rota.

This scheme would not go very far in solving problems; it would be little more than a stop-gap. But even this limited measure of using the church as an upside-down Noah's ark would be good news to the poor. At some stage, the opportunity would probably arise to talk about our love for Jesus. In the light of what we were doing, I would expect them to take some notice at least. It seemed a good way of reaching out with the good news of Jesus.

However, the proposal was not hailed as good news by the local people. One person voiced his feelings bluntly; "We don't want these people in our village". Another said that there were no homeless in the village to cater for. (But there are several hundred within a twenty mile radius). Another said that there would be nothing for them to do here during the day. (This is true everywhere. Maybe we could do something to alter that). A fourth pointed out that the nearest social security office was miles away - would it not be better to offer help close to where they would draw their benefit from. (I found out later that people with no address to quote tend to find it difficult to get benefit at all). A fifth said that since money had been spent on the church interior, it

should be kept nice. (But we call it God's house, and if God wants to use it like that, why shouldn't he?). I found it sad that all these remarks were made by members of the church, even though their resistance was understandable. I felt resistance to the idea myself.

It is not difficult to criticise this scheme, and say it is unpractical, and that insurance might be invalidated, and so forth. But then, it is always easy to find reasons for not taking action. At least it would be good news to a group of people in real desperation. And whatever happened to The Acts of the Apostles? Judging by church life today, we tend to busy ourselves with The Committee Minutes of the Apostles, or to spend time discussing The Good Ideas of the Apostles.

Noreen Towers, who has worked among the homeless in Sydney for over twenty years, has learned to distrust committees and boards of enquiry, because in her experience, little usually comes from them (Margaret Reeson, *No Fixed Address*, Lion, Oxford, 1991, p277). An ounce of action, it seems, is worth a ton of theory.

Furthermore, when all is said and done, I am still left with the belief that God actually wants this programme carried out in our church this winter. What do I do with that conviction? Attempt to carry it out all on my own, if needs be, in the face of all the opposition that appears likely?

This might be thought unwise. However, we should not rush into criticising those who take action single-handed as the result of what they believe to be God's call. While there will always be some people who are deceived, and act foolishly, there have also been examples of those who acted on their belief, and later appeared to have got it right, such as Gladys Aylward. She was turned down for missionary service in China, but decided to go on her own anyway. She went on to give a lifetime's service (*The Small Woman*, Alan Burgess).

An example of this attitude in Scripture is the story of Jonathan taking on the Philistines. With only his armour bearer with him, he assaulted the enemy line after climbing up using his hands and feet. Nobody else in the Israelite camp knew they had gone; they had to have a roll-call to find out who was missing. In the first attack, the two of them killed about twenty men, and plunged the whole army into panic. Victory for Israel followed (1 Sam 14:1-23).

It seems possible that a strained relationship was making it difficult for Jonathan and his father to work together. Jonathan did not allow that to put him off doing God's will. There seems to be an important principle here. Strained relationships are all too common in Christian work; this sad fact makes it hard to obey the call that disciples love one another. Clearly, we need to work at our relationships. However, having said that, there are times when it is better to obey God single-handed, than to lose the vision for fear of offending others.

Such action in this case could prove costly. Some folk might feel so strongly about the church building being used in this way, that they might try to use the law to prevent it. Fire regulations might be invoked, such as the lack of asbestos on doors, for example. This alerts us to the fact that law is not always helpful to the oppressed. It might turn out to be legal to leave homeless people outside in sub-zero temperatures, but illegal to admit them to a building that is not properly equipped.

Generally, with a little thought, it proves possible to find a way of doing right, when people try to invoke the law to make it difficult. This is to act in the spirit of Robin Hood. In our case, for example, it would be sufficient to open the church at 6pm for Evening Prayer, and then spin out the liturgy to last until the following morning. This would not be difficult. At one point in the Church of England service, there is the remark "Silence may be kept". Since the timing is not specified, the silence could last for sixteen hours, at the minister's discretion. I believe a lawyer would be hard put to it to find a way of disallowing this interpretation of the text of the service.

The opposition to all this from church and village could prove considerable. Once again, we find that carrying out the commands of Jesus can be a demanding business. We begin to have some idea of what the command "Take up your cross" might actually mean in practice.

By now, some readers may be thinking that we have misunderstood the words "Good news to the poor". What we have to share is a message of forgiveness of sins, achieved at great cost by Jesus' death on the cross. Our task is to take the gospel to every creature, which means primarily by

word of mouth. Social action, while important, should not be confused with evangelism, they might say.

The desire to spread the message is good as far as it goes, but it does not reflect the approach Jesus had in the gospels. His method was one of both word and deed. The gospel is not mere words; it is the total package, which included preaching, healing, deliverance and a radical life style. In practice, it is not possible to separate these elements.

We might also ask about the success rate that churches have had where they have concentrated on proclaiming the word, and left acts of love to others. How much progress has this approach actually made with disadvantaged groups, such as those with problems of alcohol or drugs or finance? Come to that, how much impact has a word-only gospel made on any section of society in the UK over recent years? It seems to me that a gospel free from loving action has been found wanting.

So as well as using words to share our belief in Jesus with the homeless overnight in the church, we would offer them the laying on of hands for any illnesses and wounds they may have. We would explain to them how their sins could be wiped away, by repentance. We would tell them that there is a way back from addiction through trusting Jesus and receiving deliverance, and seek to offer it. We would give people the chance to have prayer for inner healing from past hurts received through bad experiences. We would also share what food we had, and in cases of shortage, we would even expect to see it multiplied, as happened when Jesus fed the five thousand (For a modern example, see the video Viva Christo Re). We would aim to kit them out with clothing and shoes as required. We would try to do all this in a party atmosphere, bringing joy into their lives, since in addition to righteousness and peace, joy is part of the kingdom of God (Rom 14:17). All this is part of the gospel, it seems to me.

It is as we said earlier, the Good News is more than words. It is about the person Jesus, who comes to us in power, if we invite him. But he never forced his attentions on anybody, and so we have to live with the thought that for all our preparations and entreaties, no homeless people might show up (Luke 14:15-24). After all, the church has a poor track record in caring for down and outs, and they might be suspicious of anything to do with a church. They might prefer to try to survive in the pouring rain in the way they know, rather than risk entering a strange building that they don't know. Given the past, the church has a long way to go to make itself credible.

We have chosen to focus on bringing good news to poor people. This is because it is a gospel emphasis. Jesus taught that the rich do not respond easily. They have already received their comfort (Luke 6:24). He taught that it is not possible to serve two masters; one cannot serve God and money (Luke 16:13). While it is possible for rich people to come to the Lord, because with God all things are possible, it is very difficult - harder even than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (Matt 19:23-26). The area to aim for is poor people.

Having said that, the meaning of the word rich in this matter should not be limited to finance and possessions. Zacchaeus had wealth, and so might be thought rich, but Jesus recognised him as lost. This was probably because he was despised by other people because of his tax collecting, and he may have felt rejected and miserable as a result. Feelings of this kind may be thought of as a form of poverty. Jesus said of him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost (Luke 19:9-10)."

The picture that seems to emerge of the person ripe for the gospel is of someone with nothing - no money, no place of their own, no self respect. These people are especially close to God's heart. The principle has been expressed like this; evangelism means one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. This is well illustrated by the account of Samaria under siege in 2 Kings 7:3-20.

Before Jesus was born, his mother Mary had sung, "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." This is true to experience. Some people seem to have it all their own way in this life. They have no financial worries, stable relationships, a secure career, pleasant house, and so forth. Such people are generally not open to Jesus. They may attend church occasionally, but leave

empty, as it were. Rather it is people in need who are ready to turn to the Lord for help. When people are asked how they first found God, it was often one result of a crisis. God loves to help those in need (see Luke 16:18-31).

We may notice in passing that our description of the downtrodden fits the Jews as a race. Like Jesus after his birth, they have often been homeless refugees, down through history. Paul Johnson has pointed out that for more than three quarters of their existence as a race, a majority of Jews have always lived outside the land they call their own. They do so today. (Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1987, p4). It is almost as if the homeless in our society have something in common with God's chosen people, the Jews. God preserve us from treating the homeless with an attitude akin to anti-semitism.

It seems best, then, that the church should search out not the most influential, but the most needy, and seek to rescue them, as Jesus used to do. Such people will often appear unattractive to us. We need to remember therefore that Jesus did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance (Mark 2:17). It is as if God has a soft spot for people that many of us naturally find difficult.

It is a good thing that he does, because in his eyes, all human beings are sinners (Ps 14:2-3). We were his enemies. When Jesus said, "Love your enemies", he was telling his followers to do what God had done. He loved his enemies so much that he sent his son to die for them (Rom 5:8,10). We make a mistake, then, in lifting ourselves above other people in our own minds. This is pride, and as we noted earlier, when we have that attitude, we are heading for a fall (Prov 18:12).

Maybe this is part of the reason why, as these pages are being written, the state of our society seems to be getting more insecure by the month. As a nation, we have been proud of our recent achievements, but now we seem to be beset by problems.

I believe that our treatment of the homeless could have a bearing on the present situation of the country. It has to be admitted that in the good times, the nation largely ignored the needs of those living on the road. Followers of Jesus are called to be the salt of the earth, preserving society as salt preserves meat (Matt 5:13). This includes the call for believers to be good news and spread good news to the poor, as Jesus commanded.

Jesus met every need that he encountered, and God loves to rescue people when they cry out to him in their need, as we have seen. Followers of Jesus have been set an example. Jesus was not afraid to act on his own, in his conviction of what God wanted done (Isa 63:5, Mark 14:50). Believers today can choose to copy that attitude. Ideally, however, churches will get their act together. This will require vision, the will to respond, and good strategies to make it all happen. There is plenty for everyone to do.

As we engage in such projects, it may well be that God will note our humble approach and hear our prayers, and so heal our land (2 Chr 7:13-14).