

Poverty

A word whose time may have come

“Poor” is commonly a pejorative term. If we endure poor health, or a poor self-image, if the outlook is poor, or if we make a poor showing in the exams, it is a pretty unredeemed kind of verdict. Yet in the world of Christian spirituality the word has an aura of divine meaning and purpose like few others, and Jesus himself spoke of poverty in glowing terms.

Blessed are you who are poor: you shall be rich.

Few concepts have been so controversial. A brief survey of the Sunday press will give a fairly unalloyed expression to the contrary principle, *Blessed are you who are rich: you shall inherit the earth*. For the last two centuries the fate of the poor has regarded as an unmitigated evil, their relief the principal field of Christian ministry. (The implication that the chief blessing of the poor is to be objects of charity for the rich is unmistakable.)

One of the most impressive acts of Christian witness has been the act of embracing voluntary poverty. Precisely because it contradicts the way of the world, it has about it a power which arrests the modern mind. We can trace the influence of Mother Teresa to this fact: but she is in a great tradition, which goes back to Francis of Assisi, to the monastic movement, to the life of the desert fathers, and to Christ himself, who said he had “nowhere to lay his head”.

We might like to recognise, however, some green shoots in the world, of sensitivity towards poverty. There has been a style movement, bridging the worlds of architecture, fashion, interior decoration and so on, against proliferation and clutter, towards simplicity and clarity. For instance, highly-regarded in the world of cuisine is the Italian movement back to the farmhouse, which is actually called *cucina povera*, “poor cooking”. The fact that its ingredients cost an arm and a leg in Harrods’ food hall is to be expected, but the feeling is genuine. More seriously, there are people about who have been invited to join the materialist millions in the treadmill, who have refused the invitation, seeking a simpler lifestyle. They have done this for a variety of reasons. Some are reactionary and prophetic, like those refusing to join in the wasteful exploitation of resources, or the systems which keep the hungry hungry, the powerless enslaved. Many are disgusted by what greed and the love of wealth does to the human heart, often as exemplified by their rich relations, and seek to cut out the motives of wealth from their thinking. Some are actually hedonistically poor, like those who know that eating a little of the best is actually more enjoyable than eating a lot of the rubbish, or those who want to raise or grow everything they eat, so as to know that it is wholesome. A very few are willing to be poor for a very pure reason: because Christ was poor.

Sometimes *negative* forces can take us down the path of self-deprivation. *Anorexics* do not turn from food for any positive reason, but because they hate themselves, as expressed in the body and its processes, or in order to punish their parents, or society as a whole. *Depressed* or otherwise *mentally-ill* people can withdraw from friendship or society because of their fear of failure, or their mistrust of themselves or others, or in order to symbolize a pain they do not know how else to express. In its most extreme form, people can turn their backs on life in complete *collapse into*

illness, or in *suicide*, and we should not mistake these paths for spiritually responsible ways of life. Pathology can mimic spirituality because both are deep, and engage the whole person.

I am interested today in poverty as a virtue, and this means coming to understand it in Jesus. How does he display poverty in the Gospels?

Firstly, it is always in the voluntary sector, always a choice. The theme of poverty is *not* present in the birth-narratives, as many people believe; we are not to think of Jesus' poverty as something imposed on him by God the Father, therefore, but as something that has to be chosen by Jesus for himself. We see him doing this in the scene of the temptation in the wilderness. Notice that in the desert it is the *devil* who offers to make Jesus rich in a worldly sense. The price asked for this favour is that Jesus should give Satan worship. So at the Gospel's beginning we see the choice of riches *in direct contradiction* to the choice of God.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew reports Jesus as proclaiming the blessedness of the poor in spirit (theirs is the first beatitude). This further stresses the importance of *attitude* over the *physical* reality of poverty, which might be nothing but an affliction. He values almsgiving and fasting, which also represent voluntary poverty: but the main part of his teaching about poverty comes when he distinguishes between true and false treasure. Earthly treasure is subject to a damning weakness: it decays, and betrays those who trust in it. We must therefore look for heavenly treasure, which is above such a threat, and fix our hearts there, "where neither moth nor woodworm destroy, nor thieves break in and steal". This is hard doctrine in the world where people need money to live: but Jesus points out that anxiety kills true life, enslavement to money turns prosperity to ashes. "No-one can be the slave of two masters. Either he will hate the first and love the second, or be attached to the first and despise the second. You cannot be the slave of God and of money." Do we actually *slave* for money? We like to think not. The Gospel insists, and characteristically brings people to the point of having to choose between money and God. At last, *choice* is no longer relevant: in Jesus' view, all come to the point where money betrays them, and then there is only God – chosen or unchosen, as the case may be. "So it is when a man stores up riches for himself, instead of becoming rich in the sight of God."

The rich young man, who comes to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life, is told to keep the commandments. When he says, *I have kept all these from my youth*," Jesus tells him, *There is one thing you lack: go and sell all you have, give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me*. But his face fell, and he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth. Jesus lets him go, but then he turns to his disciples and says, *How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle*.

Behind all of this teaching in the Gospels there is a stream of thought in the writing of Paul which is very relevant. In Philippians he depicts the nature of Jesus in terms of *kenosis*, which means *emptying*. In this sense, the tendency of Jesus towards personal poverty is grounded in his own supernatural vocation.

Though he was in the form of God, Jesus Christ did not count equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became what we are; and being in every way human, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.

This humbling or emptying or ungrasping attitude, says Paul, is the model for your relationships with each other: *Let the mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*. This

is the grounding of poverty, in the unpossessive, self-giving attitude of the incarnate Christ, which kept him on a downward path of selflessness to the vanishing-point, which is the Cross.

If we return to our exemplary ground, which is that of marriage, we can see how poverty works like obedience and chastity, modifying the meaning. We no longer speak of acquisition when we think of marriage (*getting yourself a wife/husband*), but of an experience of becoming a gift, of laying-down our life for another. In order to do this responsibly, we have to know what we're doing, and freely decide to do it. We have to have the power to do it, we need control over ourselves. As for the pathological forms of selflessness, they are no substitute for the kind of freedom expressed in the incarnation. Christian life has about it a generous liberty that springs from self-possession. If we're going to give ourselves in that spirit, we need to have taken possession of what we're going to give.

Christian self-possession springs from our belief in God the Creator. We receive from God the pure gift of life, lovingly given. Accepting this gift with humility and gratitude is the first condition for being able to give it, without strings attached, without regrets, without exacting a price or revenge. Clearly this acceptance has to be unconditional too: paradoxically, we need to choose to be ourselves, and not accept the fact as a regrettable imposition. Some people end right there, because the task of being themselves can be so frightening that they can't accept it except as an affliction. It is very hard for such people to see their way to faith, to say nothing of hope or love. Belief in God can be a tremendous help, since it relieves us of the awful task of explaining why we are here and why we are ourselves. These things are for God to worry about! His love for us – as and who we are – is enough to bring us peace with the situation, however hairy it may sometimes seem.

Because this kind of self-possession is founded in the *relationship* with God, we can proceed to hold his line, never forgetting that our life is a gift. If it is a gift, we can continue to give it, and to receive others as a gift in our turn. In this way, God's gift is not just the gift of a self, but the gift of relationship. Poverty is the value which actually carries selflessness into a positive role. It isn't the sort that's imposed by circumstances, like hunger or homelessness. It's the simplicity that has no agenda to possess, and it demands the highest maturity to understand it and practice it. But it is also the most attractive and enriching quality within a human relationship. It is what enables us to say: *I am for you* with sincerity and freedom, and it makes the gift of self real and trustworthy.

The lovely abandonment of selfishness and self-concern by others always able to turn a similar key in us. Generous people attract, but also shame us into generosity. This selflessness looks natural and graceful. In fact it is the hardest thing to gain, and needs constant fidelity to maintain. Perhaps we could say that it is the most attractive of qualities: or, in the words of the old song,

Everybody loves a lover!