

Transfiguration and Poverty

St Brandon's

2 Peter 1:16-end; Matt. 17:1-9

19 February 2023

I'm aware with the earthquake in Turkey and Syria, to say nothing of the continued wars in Ukraine and elsewhere, and famines in Ethiopia and elsewhere, that focusing on poverty in this country might seem to be almost inappropriate this morning. Extreme need is everywhere. But poverty should concern us, not least because of the seemingly intractable nature of it, the difficulty of getting out of it for generation on generation, and the tragic loss of human potential that it involves.

But, although our focus this morning is on poverty on this Church Action on Poverty¹ Sunday, we decided to keep the set readings. So, I do want to say something about Christ's transfiguration, before turning to the issue of poverty. And I do so partly because I think it's possible to make a connection between the two without forcing the issue.

So, Peter, James and John accompanied Jesus up a high mountain where Jesus was transfigured before them. As Peter says in his letter, "we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty ... for He received honour and glory from God the Father". What they were given on the mountain was a brief glimpse of who Jesus really was – God's beloved Son who was and is of one substance with the Father. So, what the three disciples saw was Jesus *as He truly was and is* – 'veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity' as the hymn puts it.

But, of course, once the transfiguration was over and Jesus returned to His earthly form, what the disciples also began to realise was what He had given up. So, as it says in Philippians (2:5-8) "Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness". Or, as the hymn we shall sing puts it, 'Thou who was't rich beyond all measure, all for love's sake becomest poor'.

And then, Jesus ordered the disciples as they came down from the mountain to tell no one about the vision until after He had been raised from the dead. It's interesting that He chose another point at which He was, in a sense, transfigured as the point at which His transfiguration could be revealed. And I guess the logic was that others were more likely to believe and understand the first transfiguration when they saw Jesus in His transfigured and resurrected body, and a body which, of course, held out the hope of further transfiguration and resurrection.

So, what might we take from this as we turn to look at poverty? Well, first that looking beyond the surface and seeing someone for who they really are is always a good thing. Second, that without in any sense glorifying poverty, Jesus does give a certain dignity to it – all for love's sake becomest poor. And third, that Jesus's transfiguration and His resurrection

¹ [home - Church Action on Poverty \(church-poverty.org.uk\)](http://church-poverty.org.uk)

hold out the hope and indeed the promise of transformation, just as the disciples saw the divine glory at home and at work in our world.

And so, to poverty. One of the fundamentals in Church Action on Poverty's work is the principle that the experts on poverty are those people who are in poverty, and so we should listen first to their voice. One way that they put this is: 'Nothing about us, without us, is for us'. And in that sense, I have nothing to say this morning, so perhaps the best I can do is to start by giving the poor their voice in so far as that's possible. The following is a kind of poem based on stories and reflections shared by participants in a Church Action on Poverty's media programme in 2016, and it's called 'Poverty is many things', by Tony Walsh.

Poverty is not entertainment, it's not noble or romantic.
Poverty is ... heavy.
It's heavy hearts and heavy legs.
It's sore skin and hollow eyes.
It's upset and downhearted.
It's hunger. Malnourishment. It's always thinking about the next meal.
Poverty is bailiffs, it's food banks, it's queues and lists, it's never being told what you're entitled to but always being told.
Poverty is being shown up then put down.
It's missed payments and mistrust.
It's always answering questions but never answering the door.
Poverty is hiding in plain view. It's hiding.
Poverty is high bills and low pay.
It's higher costs and lower self-esteem.
It's invisible scars and visible pain.
Poverty is living next door, it's living on your nerves, it's not living, it's ... barely surviving.
Poverty is ... everywhere. With ... nowhere to turn.
It's a gut-wrenching silence, screaming.
Poverty is depressing, demotivating and dehumanising.
It's degradation, desperation and despair.
Poverty is feeling ... worthless, it's feeling anxious, it's feeling excluded, it's feeling rejected, it's feeling ashamed, it's feeling trapped, it's feeling angry, it's feeling frustrated, poverty is ... exhausting.
It's not feeling anything. It's ... numb.
Poverty is ... crushing, Empty. Lonely.
Poverty is cold. It's damp. It's ill health. Bad housing. Sadness, fear and human misery.
Poverty is ignored and abandoned. It's sanctioned and sectioned. It's late payments and early deaths.
Poverty is not something that happens to ... 'others'.
Poverty is our old people, our young people, our sick people, our disabled people, our mentally ill people, our homeless people.
Poverty is people seeking asylum, it's people who are refugees, people who are migrants. Poverty is over-worked, under-paid everyday people.

Poverty is people. It's children. Babies. Not ... 'them'. Us.
'Poverty is the worst form of violence' (Mahatma Gandhi)
Poverty is growing in our country. In ~~2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023~~.
Poverty is many things, but
it is not
acceptable.

Church Action on Poverty has three key values that underpin their vision of a world free from poverty: *dignity*, *agency* and *power*. Dignity is first about those in poverty being dignified despite their circumstances, and second about ensuring those in poverty receive the respect that is their due. It's about seeing 'them' not as a problem or a statistic, but as people in their own right. It links back to the transfiguration in seeing people *as they truly are*, and we would surely want to include in that that 'they' are made in the image of God just as 'we' are, and in that lies their and our fundamental dignity. It also links back to the point that Jesus, as He emptied Himself of His glory, gave a certain dignity to poverty without in any sense glorifying it.

Agency is about the capacity of individuals to act and to make their own free choices. And again, as Darren McGarvey emphasised in his Reith Lecture last year, this is first for those in poverty to grasp for themselves, but also for those not in poverty, including government at local and national level, to enable.

One way that Church Action on Poverty is doing that is by introducing Local Pantries.² So, whereas Food Banks, necessary as they are, tend to reinforce a lack of dignity and lack of agency, Local Pantries operate as membership food clubs and neighbourhood hubs. Members pay a small amount each week and in return *they choose* (agency) at least ten items of food or other groceries worth many times more. So, the claim is that Pantries strengthen communities, foster friendships, loosen the grip of poverty, and contribute to healthier happier lives.

Power is about the ability, capacity and willingness of a person, a group of people or an institution to act. In that sense it's like agency but also raises the stakes to a higher level. One of the key experiences associated with poverty, as the 'poem' I read earlier indicated, is a sense of powerlessness, particularly against institutions such as employers, the Dept. for Work and Pensions, the Police, or the NHS.

One way that Church Action on Poverty has tried to address this is by holding Poverty Truth Commissions where those in poverty can speak truth to power. One outcome of that, in Salford, was that the City Council realised that when someone got into debt over their Council tax, the first person they ever met in the process was the bailiff who came to seize their home and sell their property. They've now stopped using bailiffs and run coffee morning drop-in centres for any Salford resident who wants to talk through any problems with Council tax face-to-face.

² See [Your Local Pantry](#)

Things can change for the better. It needn't go on being as it is. That we know both from examples like these, but also from the fact that Jesus's transfiguration and His resurrection hold out the hope and indeed the promise of transformation, the divine glory at home and at work in our world.

The Church in general, not just represented by organisations like Church Action on Poverty, needs to be at the forefront in this – the fourth of the five marks of mission is, after all, to seek to transform unjust structures of society. The fact that churches are more likely to close in low-income areas than wealthier ones,³ is therefore a scandal.

So this leaves us, as Church and as individuals, with the uncomfortable question of what we can and should do about this. But we face that question with the resources that Christ's transfiguration provides – seeing people for who they really are; enabling dignity and agency; speaking truth to power knowing that transformation is possible.

Amen.

³ See Church Times, 17 February 2023, 'More churches close in poorer areas, study says'.