

Church Action on Poverty Sunday

Isaiah 35:3-6; Psalm 147:1-7; Luke 10:1-9

We've been supporting Church Action on Poverty (CAoP) for many years. It's not one of the charities we support on a regular basis from our general giving, but marking CAoP Sunday regularly has given us the opportunity both to reflect on and support their work (more on that later), and also to reflect on our own attitudes and commitment to the eradication of poverty.

CAoP works with others to identify the causes of poverty and address them, and engages in social action (I'll come back to one example of that), political engagement, prayer and theology. One of its key tenets is that the experts on poverty are those who are or have been in poverty, and so listening to their voices is absolutely key.

The last time we marked this was March last year. The theme then was 'Dreams and Realities', and we had a display of pictures and stories of several people who were or are in poverty. I think CAoP has moved its Sunday to this time of year because 17 October is the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty – so here we are on the Sunday closest to that. And note the ambition inherent in the International Day – the *eradication* of poverty not just its reduction. And why not? Jesus's comment that "the poor you will always have with you" (e.g. Matthew 26:11) should be taken only as an observation on the state of the world, not a conclusion that this will always and necessarily be the case. Much of Jesus's teaching and action leads to the opposite conclusion, and we cannot seriously imagine the coming of the Kingdom of God involving poverty of any kind.

And we see something of this in two of our readings this morning. Isaiah speaks of restoration following judgement – the blind, the deaf, the lame, the dumb will all have their senses restored, and the natural world too will be renewed, with streams flowing in the desert. Although it doesn't mention people in poverty explicitly, here is a picture of things being put right, things as they were meant to be. And it's not difficult to extend that to include those who are materially poor. And particularly so when that is precisely what our psalm says: "The Lord lifts up the poor".

How should we respond to that message of the Kingdom? I was struck by a quote on the publicity for this year's CAoP Sunday by a vicar from Dingle in Ireland:

"Churches *have* to do this. Honestly, you have got to put people who are poor first, I think. We have been doing this for five years and people are coming all the time, and we find out a lot from people when they come."

So, a real engagement with people who are in poverty, inviting them to come along, and clearly receiving from them as well as giving to them. And it's clearly worked for them. I wonder what that might mean for us.

Perhaps one way of approaching that might link to the theme for this CAoP Sunday – “Food, faith and fellowship”. And note the order – food first! I think one of the reasons for choosing that as this year's theme has to do with CAoP's initiative called ‘Your Local Pantry’. They now have over 115 of these across the country, and the idea behind them is that they offer more than food banks. As well as food available at reduced prices, there are drop-in cafes, communal lunches, cookery classes and recipe swaps. And, as a result, friendships are formed. One member (and these are membership organisations) recalled, “I found friends, connected with people and it improved my mental health and sense of being included and belonging to a local community”.

One thing that's interesting here is that these Local Pantries are not principally about *giving* food, but about *sharing* it. And that allows hospitality to flow in two directions not just one.

We see something like that going on in our Gospel passage this morning. It is, as we heard, from Luke so a good way to mark ‘Luke the Evangelist’ Sunday. And it is about evangelism – the seventy being sent out by Jesus in pairs ahead of Him to proclaim the Good News of peace and that the Kingdom of God has come near. But, it's not all one-way traffic. The seventy are told to eat and drink whatever is provided for them in the houses in which they're invited to stay, and again to eat what is set before them.

And it probably doesn't stretch the imagination too far to suggest that it was over these shared meals that conversations would have taken place, conversations about Jesus and all He had been doing, and who the disciples understood Him to be – for it was only in the previous chapter in Luke's gospel that Peter had correctly identified Jesus as the Messiah.

So, the same question returns – what might all this mean for us both individually and collectively? One thought here might be in relation to the congregational lunches we've started recently. These are excellent examples of ‘Food, faith and fellowship’ for us, as well as being fundraisers. But I wonder how we might develop that idea in a way that reaches out beyond us, and into the community around us.

One of the things that came out of the PMC process was a renewed openness to partnership with the community, something that has borne fruit (pun intended) in a number of ways. But, in a village that's already well known for its food and hospitality, how might food play even more of a role in our partnerships?

To help us think about this, CAoP has provided some resources [slides]. They've commissioned from one of their supporters three ‘tablescape’ paintings, reflecting the theme of food, faith and fellowship. Each is accompanied by a scripture reading, and

some conversation prompts. The themes are: The radical banquet, appropriately from Luke's gospel; Communal joy & breaking bread from Acts; and Hospitality to strangers from Hebrews.

On tables on either side of the Church, these three paintings, with the associated scripture reading and the starter questions are set out. So, the activity that forms the 'Reflection' part of our service, is to go to one side of the Church or the other, and spend some time looking at one or more (maybe all three) of these paintings, and considering the scripture reading and starter questions. And then talk to each other about what strikes you, what you think this might mean either for you or for the Church.

And then, when we've had 15 minutes or so to do that, we'll come back together and share anything that we feel is worth us all hearing – again, either something personal or something more collective.

So, once we've sung the next hymn written specially for today, off you go!

Art resources: Food, faith & fellowship



The radical banquet

Luke 14: 12-14

- If we filled the seats in church strictly to Jesus's instructions here, what would our service look like next Sunday?
- Who are the 'rich neighbours' or comfortable friends we default to inviting into our social circles? Why is it so terrifying to invite people who cannot repay us?
- What are the modern 'excuses' we use to avoid coming to God's table, or avoid inviting others to it?

Art resources: Food, faith & fellowship



Communal joy & breaking bread

Acts 2: 44-47

- The early church met daily and shared everything in common. What stops our modern communities from living with that level of trust and vulnerability?
- What does a 'glad and sincere heart' look like visually? Do you see it reflected in this artwork?
- How can we move from just eating together on Sundays to truly 'breaking bread' with people in our communities?

Art resources: Food, faith & fellowship



Hospitality to strangers

Hebrews 13: 1-2

- If an unexpected, completely disruptive stranger walked in and sat at this table now, how would the atmosphere change? Would they be welcomed, or tolerated?
- Think of a time you felt like an outsider. What did someone do - or fail to do - to make you feel at home?
- How does the visual of a rich, abundant feast challenge the way we set boundaries around who we let into our lives?