

Sermon preached at All Saints, Boyne Hill, Maidenhead on the 27<sup>th</sup> January, 2019 on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany

Texts 1 Corinthians Chapter 12: 12-31a and Luke 4 : 14-21

During the early years of my ministry spent in Newport and Ebbw Vale, South Wales during the late 1990's I discovered the challenge of 'Jubilee 2000'. As many people will remember Jubilee 2000 was a challenge offered to the G7 which contained the most powerful countries of the world to cancel 3<sup>rd</sup> World Debt. Later in 2005 the follow-up to Jubilee 2000, called 'Make Poverty History' made its presence known challenging the G8. I found myself frequently preaching and leading assemblies in schools on the theme of cancelling 3<sup>rd</sup> World Debt.

A typical assembly would take the form of two tables being set up either side of the hall. On one table I would lay an abundance of food and some coins. On the other side of the hall the other table had rather less food and money set upon it. I would invite the children to say which party they would prefer to attend and of course everyone wanted the abundance of food and money. I tried to even things up by taking some of the food from the rich table along with some money and placed it on the poor table. The children seemed reasonably happy with this (even those from the rich table!). However, when I then took more money and food from the poor table than had initially been offered to pay back their debt there was an uproar of disapproval.

Following the simple use of the visual aids highlighting the difference between the rich and the poor I explained the idea that many poor countries in trying to pay back loans on money borrowed from rich countries failed to then provide good and basic health care, education and infrastructure to their people. This is of course a complex situation but put simply it meant that 39 countries received partial or full cancellation of loans to foreign governments and financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank.

As a result of Jubilee 2000 Finance ministers of the World's wealthiest countries agreed to debt relief. A 2004 study by the World Bank and the IMF found that Tanzania used savings to eliminate school fees, hire more teachers and build more schools. Burkina Faso reduced the cost of life saving drugs and increased access to clean water. Uganda doubled school enrolment. In 2005 Make poverty History led to Zambia increasing investment in Health care, education and rural infrastructure.

Of course, there are negatives. The argument goes that by cancelling debt we encourage countries to default on debt, deliberately borrow more than can be paid back and there will be the risk of corrupt leaders stealing money that should be used for the poor.

What does the Gospel say to us today?

What we discover is that Jesus right at the beginning of his ministry reads from the Prophet Isaiah Chapter 61 and highlights the continuity of the Old Testament laws with his ministry of fulfilment. The message from Isaiah is one of good news to the poor and liberation for the oppressed. 'To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour refers to the ideas from Leviticus Ch 25 and the year of Jubilee. 'All properties lost in economic transactions will be restored and returned in order to permit a stable, functioning community'. (Walter Brueggemann, Westminster Bible Commentary: Isaiah 40-66) and used in an article in the Church Times by Angus Ritchie. What we discover is that life and faith within a Christian community should value not how much we get or earn but how much we are willing to share. What is clear is that Moses believed in ethical trading which should not be concerned with greed and monopoly where we have some people owning lots and others having little or nothing. For Moses the best way to lead a community of people was to suggest the idea of

Jubilee where after 49 years the land that had been used by people to generate profit from it should be handed back to the rightful owners. It is the idea that what we earn or grow from God's land is his and we should therefore share it. This is a challenging demand from the Bible. It is difficult news for all of us. I prefer to keep what is mine for my security and my family and for the rainy day. What I have worked for in this life is not yours and the idea of family is only my family not the Body of Christ the People of God.

It is of course no different for the people that Jesus is preaching too in the Synagogue as they find this message challenging too. As Brueggemann suggests in his sermon 'On Signal: Breaking the Vicious Cycles' in his book 'Inscribing the Text' Fortress Press, 'I am Jubilee, Isaiah wrote about it, I am going to enact it'. If we read on in Luke's Gospel, we discover the people are so angry at Jesus' message they want to hurl him over a cliff!

As we think about the demanding challenge of the Gospel, I believe the only way we can attempt to live this way much like the Beatitudes is to live life as if the best is yet to come. This vision is about God's Kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven. This is a vision of the Kingdom where we see each other made in God's image, where everyone has enough and no one seeks more, where people are valued and people live in peace. Again, back to Brueggemann 'it is a kingdom where justice, mercy, kindness and peace reign, where no one is under threat, no one is at risk because all are safe, all are valued, all are honoured, all are cared for.'

When we look at the world that we live in we know that it is hard to find peace when some people have everything and others are denied health, education and a future and housing. That was at the heart of Jubilee 2000 and Make Poverty History. Paul's letter highlights that we are all in this together. It's only by living in Christ that we can share God's purpose for this world. Jane Williams invites us to think of the incarnation. 'We tend to assume that Jesus became like us but now we discover we are invited to become like him.' (Ritchie's Church Times article) This is a huge challenge becoming as Oxford Diocese states 'To live Christ like lives'.

In our Epistle we find that through our Baptism we receive the Holy Spirit and become members of the Body of Christ. By the Spirit we are united in God as father, Son and Holy Spirit. At the Eucharist we share this day we are fed and nurtured and we are in communion with God and each other. We are partaking of the Body of Christ to become His body, His light to the world. I told you that you are not going to fancy this sermon. As I think of the challenge I'm not sure I do either.