

This document is offered for discussion of basic Christian views and does not represent policy or officially agreed views of Anglican Essentials Wales or any of its member organisations.

Prosperity – and yet “The poor will be always with us”



In chapter 26 of Matthew's gospel we are told at verse 11:

¹¹ For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.

Jesus Christ was the perfect Christian and he was never, ever financially wealthy. He told his followers that the poor will always be here.

To be a Christian means that we believe in Jesus Christ and so that is what the word “CHRISTian” means. So any Christian needs to see what

Jesus Christ says in the chapter 26 at verse 6 onwards showing how he appreciated what the woman was doing (verse 10).

So why aren't believers in Christ well protected in this world and why are they not always prosperous and wealthy? Of course Jesus Christ himself was never wealthy financially and ultimately he died on a cross so we can't say that from our perspective he was perfectly protected either!

In the words of Matthew's Gospel (and it appears in other Gospels such as the Gospel of St John) Jesus is responding to the disciples' complaint that the perfume for his anointing was expensive and they could have sold it instead of this woman anointing him. Jesus instead compliments the woman and praises her actions in front of the disciples. So our Lord Jesus is doing two things here – Not only is Jesus Christ confirming to us all that we must care for others, he is also NOT criticising anyone for giving what they can, no matter how expensive and luxurious it is, from what they have. So he is praising this woman for her gift and we should then do the same.

What Jesus Christ is not doing is speaking of any prosperity preaching that takes the poor away, instead he is recognising everyone's real worth precisely because we are all made in the image of God.

Matthew's gospel is not the only place in the Bible you can find this concept. Even in the Old Testament we are told in Deuteronomy chapter 15 at verse 11:

¹¹ For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'

So we can see that what Jesus Christ is not doing is teaching any prosperity preaching that takes the poor away, instead he is recognising everyone's worth as we are all made in the image of God. Jesus Christ instead tells us about storing up riches in heaven.

As Billy Graham said:

You and I live in the most prosperous society the world has ever seen—and yet hunger, homelessness and poverty are still a tragic reality for millions every day. At least half the world's population lives on the edge of survival because of the effects of poverty. How can we remain indifferent to their plight?

In Matthew's gospel at chapter 6 we can read in verse 11:

¹⁹ "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

So Jesus is not offering wealth and prosperity for all in this secular world but treasures in heaven which are permanent for us.

In the very first chapter of Genesis we are told that God made man and woman "in His own image". Therefore for everyone to be equal and made in the image of God is a basic Judaeo-Christian concept. We are all offered the chance to become better people and more like Jesus Christ himself. The differences that start to develop are differences of our own choosing and making. We either accept the Christian reality of gradually being changed into the likeness of Jesus Christ, or we do not.

Poor people are our equal, and to the shame of many rich people they often give from what they have, and it is poor people who often give most generously of all.

The truth is that most of us live lives that we think are "secure" but, in reality, we are very close to becoming poor ourselves, always. My wife and I did a soup kitchen for the homeless when we lived in Birmingham once a month very early on Sunday mornings. It was organised by a Buddhist group as a multi-faith venture in the city centre. We actually never really made anything of what we had done earlier that morning at Church at all. There was a man who used to come each month and we'd feed him. I discovered later that he had done sound effects for BBC radio, and had done some very, very well known shows, but I realised that the truth was that he couldn't handle a rent book at all, he simply wasn't that kind of person. He was incredibly clever, but I realised that he was different to me, that is all, very different.

It is St Paul who reminds us in his letters that each body has different parts but that all those parts are important. Different but important, and so you matter, we all matter. Poor people can sometimes be different to us but they are still our equals.

It is also St Paul who tells us several times, as he does in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 at verse 18, that if we really accept Jesus Christ then we are allowing him to change us:

¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Similarly St Paul writes in Romans chapter 8 at verse 29:

²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.

So it is not just the few, but anyone who accepts Jesus Christ into their lives and allows Christ to change them is going to be in a large (i.e. huge) family and, within that family, we will all be treated as sons.

July 2019