

Session 5

Welfare/Benefits/Poverty

'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures....' (Psalm 23:1)

Worship

Responses

Make way for the one who comes in the name of the Lord,
the one who comes to proclaim good news to the poor.

What does the Lord require of us?

To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread,

because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; God will not fail you or forsake you.

What does the Lord require of us?

To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

What the Lord requires - a biblical reflection

Voice 1: I ask again my friends, what does the Lord require of you?

All: **To do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.**

Voice 1: To whom should justice be shown?

Voice 2: Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

Voice 1: To whom should we show kindness?

Voice 2: Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,
but those who are kind to the needy honour him.

Voice 1: How do we walk humbly with God?

Voice 2: With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord; in the great throng of worshipers
I will praise him. For he stands at the right hand of the needy, to save their
lives from those who would condemn them

Voice 1: I ask again my friends, what does the Lord require of you?

All: **To do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.**

Prayer

Gracious God,
Creator of all,

Today we remember the words of your Son, that 'the poor will always be with us'. Make us ready to proclaim and be good news for the poor, to live as your hospitable and generous people. Help us to challenge systems that keep people in poverty and may your church honour Christ through outrageous acts of generous and grace-filled hospitality.

In his name we pray.

Amen.

Scripture reading

John 12:1-8

Reflect:

Reflect on a time when someone has been really generous to you? And a time when you were able to be really generous to someone else. How did it make you feel?

Some Thoughts and Background:

Poverty is a sin.

No image of God's Kingdom envisions people as anything other than equal with one another; no image of God's Kingdom has some people in need while others live in excess. Poverty falls short of what God expects and that by definition is sinful.

The Bible has far more to say about economics than about virtually any other subject! Even familiar passages that we often associate with other meanings have underlying them a cry against poverty. Psalm 23 must be the most well known psalm, yet its picture of plentiful abundance as God's ideal state for humankind is rarely defined as a critique of economic deprivation. Matthew 25: 31-45 is often used to show that we should be kind to those in need! Nothing wrong with that of course, but more importantly, it is at its heart a parable of the incarnation. God is incarnate in the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick and the prisoner. Kneeling in service at the feet of the poor we kneel too at the feet of Christ.

The highlighted passage for reading this week from John's gospel is often used as an excuse not to help the poor! The writer of John's gospel presents Jesus as saying that, 'the poor will always be with us.' This is often interpreted to mean that we shouldn't really be worried about the poor because there is nothing we can do about their situation. Yet in the light of the above reflections can we really believe that is what Jesus meant? This is a passage about Mary's response to Jesus and Judas' response to her and it speaks of extravagant generosity verses mean-heartedness. In Jesus' words of verse 8 we can find not an excuse to stand silent about poverty but rather an imperative to generosity. Much more likely, knowing everything else we know about Jesus, is that in saying 'You will always have the poor with you' he was implying that 'you can help them anytime you want.' Search hard enough and you can actually find some translations which say this! It is hard to believe that the Jesus of Luke 4: 14-21 who, at the start of his ministry, is given the scroll of the prophet of Isaiah and chooses to read from the place where it is written 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor...' could have meant anything else!

You can help the poor anytime you want. Surely that time is now. There is a common myth in our media, conversations and churches that poor people are scroungers and cheats and honest taxpayers are the ones who pay for their easy life on benefits. Government figures from 2014 show that benefit fraud amounted to £1.6bn however the amount lost to the government through tax dodging by individuals was £7.1bn! This figure rises massively if we add in tax dodging by companies and corporations!

Adding to the scandal of poverty is the government's system of sanctions for those on benefits - measures taken against an individual if they fail to fulfil the obligations imposed on them while receiving benefits. It would be like someone in full time work having their pay stopped if they were late once, or missed a meeting for any reason. Those who devised the sanctions system accept that it would be normal for a healthy adult to suffer some deterioration in their health if sanctioned! Add into the mix delays in paying benefits, the bedroom tax, zero-hours contracts, refusal to pay a living, or even a minimum wage, no recourse to public funds for many refugees and people going through the immigration process and it is clear that the reasons why people live in poverty in the UK in 2016 are many and complex.

The passage in Luke 4: 14-21 has been dubbed Jesus' Manifesto. He takes upon himself the words of the prophet Isaiah. He (Jesus) is the one who has come to bring good news to the poor. What does good news to poor look like? At the heart of it has to be the alleviation of their poverty.

London Welfare/benefits / poverty stats

The total wealth of a household at the bottom (the 10th percentile) is £6,300; towards the top (the 90th percentile) it was £1.1 million. London's 90:10 wealth ratio is 173, almost three times the ratio for the rest of Britain (at 60)

London has the 3rd highest number of billionaires of anywhere in the world, behind New York and Moscow

27% of Londoners live in poverty after housing costs are taken into account, compared with 20% in the rest of England.

London is Europe's largest city and the sixth richest in the world

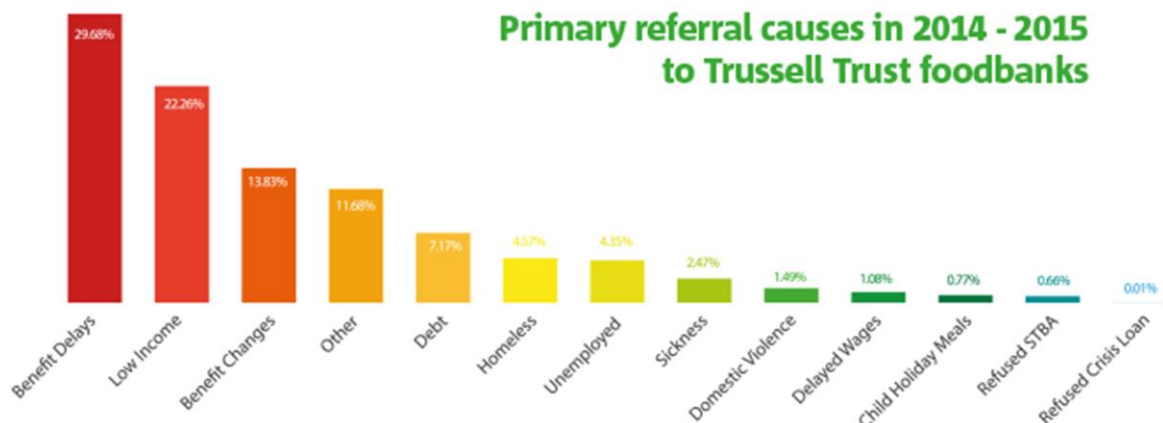
Almost 700,000 jobs in London (18%) pay below the London Living Wage. This number has increased for five consecutive years, particularly among men working full-time

Tower Hamlets has the highest rate of child poverty in the country with 42% of children living in poverty and 66% living in low income houses

London has the most unequal pay distribution of any part of the UK wholly due to pay at the top end. The top 10% of employees in London receive at least £1,420 a week, £350 higher than the next highest region. The bottom 10% in London earn no more than £340, only £40 higher than the next highest region

Half of 0 to 19-year-olds in London (1.1 million) live in a family that receives tax credits. 640,000 live in working families and received on average £8,100 a year in tax credits; an amount that is likely to be much lower from April 2016 due to government cuts

The Trussell Trust has 25 food banks in London and last year provided crisis food for 3 days to 104,799 people, 40,043 of which were children.



Discuss:

- Have you ever felt yourself to be in poverty? If so, are you willing to share what it was/is like?
- What can be done to reduce poverty in London?
- Should Christians get involved in campaigning against government policy if they believe it goes against what Jesus teaches?
- Do food banks and other community projects aimed at alleviating poverty help, or do they just make the problem worse?

And finally.....

What specific stories, experiences or points relating to welfare/benefits/poverty would you like to bring to the attention of the Mayoral candidates?