

Sunday 18 February 2024 – Christianity, Poverty and Politics – Michael Bayley

This is the first Sunday in Lent, the Christian religious observance commemorating the 40 days that Jesus Christ spent in the desert, a period of reflection, meditation, and preparation for the Easter week to come. Michael Bayley invites us to reflect. and act, on a theme that takes us to the heart of our Christian social mission.

Readings:

Psalm 51: 1-17.

Sermon: Christianity, poverty, and politics – Michael Bayley

Psalm 53 is a passionate cry from an individual overwhelmed by sense of sin and with a desperate to be forgiven. “Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!” (Verses 1 – 2). This is a troubled soul longing for forgiveness. “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” (Verse 7) it is a powerful and heartfelt plea but it does at times seem to go over the top. “I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me... Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” (Verse 3, 5)

Part of me thinks – I know I am far from perfect but I’m not sure that I can identify with sinning to this extent *as an individual*. Clearly it is important to acknowledge and seek forgiveness for things we have done wrong individually. Psalm 51:17: expresses very well the relief that this can bring. “A broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” But we also need to acknowledge that we are part of the corporate sin of the world. We are implicated in so many ways with the horror with which the world confronts us. I want to look at this in relation to the extent and depth of poverty, often extreme poverty, in this country.

Last month I went to the exhibition *Life on the Breadline: Christianity, Poverty and politics in the 21st-century City*.¹ I was shocked. I knew a certain amount about the extent of poverty and indeed destitution of so many people in this country but this really hit me. The first thing that struck me was the astonishing figure, that in 2008/9 the Trussell Trust provided nearly 27,000 food parcels. By 2022/3 that figure had risen over a hundred fold to nearly 3 million. How has this come about? It is essentially the result of the economic policy of austerity which was introduced by the government after the financial crash of 2008. From 2009 the government began making large-scale cuts in public funding. These have included cuts to housing benefit (made worse by the bedroom tax). Child benefit was frozen for three years from 2011, legal aid has been cut, many Sure Start centres had been closed, in April 2016 benefits were frozen for four years instead of rising with inflation. Job centres are being closed, and new claimants for universal credit have to wait at least five weeks before their first payment. Children have been affected disproportionately.

And then came Covid and the cost of living crisis. It has been remorseless. As a result a recent report of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that in 2021/22 more than one in five people in the UK were in poverty. That is nearly 14 ½ million people. Of these 6 million people were in ‘very deep’ poverty. It’s not just money. It affects the whole of people’s lives. Stuart, a food bank client in Birmingham, said: “Just the poverty, it affects people’s moods, everyone seems

¹ The “Life on the Breadline Exhibition” was presented at Highfield Trinity Methodist Church, Sheffield, from 10-17 February 2024. See: <https://www.sheffieldmethodist.org/news/news-stories/life-on-breadline-exhibition.html>

miserable, depressed, anxious, worried, a lot of debt, struggling for food and you know just the basics of life, struggling to pay bills.”

Clearly we are part of the political, social, economic system which has resulted in this very worrying, and for many people desperate, situation. It surely demands a response from Christians. One of the readings for Ash Wednesday from Isaiah 58 is particularly telling:

Is not this the fast that I choose;
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and to bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Verses 6 – 7)

What can we learn from some of the ways in which Christians and the churches have responded? One obvious indicator of church involvement is that 80% of food banks in the UK run by the faith groups but Christian responses to poverty go much wider than food banks.

Hodge Hill Church in Birmingham has adopted an approach which focuses on the gifts and assets in the neighbourhood. It identifies what is ‘strong’ before going on to address what is ‘wrong’. The vicar Al Barrett summarises this as: “Turning I need into I can.” The Street Connectors are local residents and volunteers who go from door to door on the estate to foster conversations with residents, listen and to build community. One result of this was to transform a neglected patch into a communal garden. Another is the Junk Food Café where volunteers cook a three course meal which is then served to anyone on a pay as you can basis. The café plays an important role in tackling social isolation. They also had, before Covid, a Drop-in/Open Door which was a free advice and support session with a solicitor giving free advice once a month, laptops and phones were available for anyone to use and volunteers were on hand to help with understanding and writing letters, CVs and similar queries. It was followed by community lunch, on a donation only basis. Penny, a volunteer and local resident said: “It became a gathering of friends.”

The Inspire Centre in Manchester has a similar approach to Hodge Hill. Their activity is not framed in the language of responding to poverty but rather has a vision of: “a place where people from different backgrounds can come together in order to live more whole lives...it’s a response to how do we live together in a neighbourhood, rather than how are we going to help poor people.” They also have a café open Monday to Friday providing cheap freshly cooked food and drinks.

Church Action on Poverty is a national antipoverty charity which combines social action, advocacy and enabling others to take action. One of the most imaginative things they have done is working with people experiencing poverty because they are the “real experts in poverty”. On several occasions they have brought together church leaders and activists from across the UK to share good practice You can learn more about the important work from David Price and Joe Forde.

Notting Hill Methodist Church in London is close to Grenfell Tower. On 14 June 2017 Mike Long, the Minister received a phone call telling him that Grenfell Tower was on fire. He rushed to the scene and spent the night sitting with people who had fled the fire. In the weeks following the Church's building became an informal space of welcome for those whose lives had been shattered by the Grenell blaze. Whilst the size of the congregation Notting Hill Methodist Church is smaller than in the past, its significance in the community surrounding Grenfell Tower has not declined. As in many diverse inner-city communities faith groups remain trusted key players in civil society politics because of their networks and relationships across the local neighbourhood. Since 2017 Notting Hill Methodist Church has become a focal point for vigils and services of remembrance, as well as a venue for community meetings demanding housing justice in the months that followed the fire.

The exhibition was curated to accompany an ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) funded report: *Life on the Breadline: Christianity on the Breadline: Christianity, Poverty and Politics in the 21st Century City*.² I have tried to give you a flavour of this challenging report. The situation is depressing but by the time I had finished reading it I was surprised by how encouraged I was. Churches can do some remarkably useful things. That does not mean that all churches also engaged but many are. What is vital is local presence, being there, being part of the local community, often working with other faith groups and local organisations. Being represented at regional and national level also helps but effectiveness of these levels depends on being well grounded locally.

It is all too easy to slip into accepting that this is just how things are and maybe we can help a bit on the edges. How do we avoid being overwhelmed and despairing? How do we keep being practically compassionate? There are no easy answers to these questions. I am sure that all of you in some way by doing something already but it is abundantly obvious that what is being done at the national political level is grossly inadequate and I am also sure that we in the churches could do more.

It is hard to know how to finish the sermon. This is not a political meeting where we have to have a political agenda worked out ready to be implemented. I suggest we have to live with the discomfort and use that discomfort creatively. Just feeling guilty about having enough to eat and enough money is futile but the discomfort needs to make us ask hard questions of ourselves, of our churches, of our society, and of our politicians. Let me give two simple examples.

1. Local churches, especially in poor areas, are vitally important. How do we, especially in the richer areas, support them better?
2. We will have a general election this year. Jesus had a special concern for the poor, so must we. We need to ask the politicians some awkward questions, for example 'We are prepared to support food banks because they give essential help when it is needed desperately. But we want a society where food banks are not needed. What are you going to do to make that possible?'

I suggest that our personal piety, prayers and hopes need to become better integrated with the brutal, structural realities of the world we live in. We need the new covenant of which Jeremiah spoke: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Verse 33). To finish here is a prayer which may help us to be faithful to Jesus in a world which needs his active, compassionate grace so desperately:

² Available from: https://breadlineresearch.coventry.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Life-on-the-Breadline-report-for-policymakers_July-2021_web-1.pdf

Lord, what is the point of your presence if our lives do not alter?
Change our lives: shatter our complacency.
Make your word flesh of our flesh,
Blood of our blood and our life's purpose.
Take away that self regard which makes our consciences feel clear.
Press us uncomfortably, for it is only thus that another peace is made – *your* peace.

Amen

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