

Poverty and Plenty: Where Do or Should Christians Stand?

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The advantage for a Catholic like me speaking after an Anglican scripture scholar like Rev Erica Mathieson is that I can be satisfied that the hard work of exegesis has been done and I can settle into some musings in the light of scripture, our experiences and the Tradition. I confess to some reservations about the assigned topic for the evening. Having just chaired the National Human Rights Consultation I would be very hesitant to speculate on where Christians as a group stand on anything – let alone on poverty and plenty. I daresay issues of poverty and plenty are not all that far removed from considerations of justice and human rights – issues which excite great emotions and conflicts among Christians in contemporary Australia.

Over the years, I have often been involved in public advocacy of policy positions consistent with Catholic social teaching and with the Church's moral tradition. I make no claim that all Catholic bishops have agreed with my own analysis as to how my Church's teaching is to be applied when making law or public policy, rather than how it is to be applied when simply enunciating what is moral or preferable behaviour for the individual wanting to live a good life consistent with that Church teaching.

This is the first time that I have been on the other side of a public inquiry process, trying to respond to the various Church voices putting sometimes contrary views on an issue of law or public policy. What were we to make of the varying formal positions on a Human Rights Act put forward by the governing bodies of the three major churches?

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference "noted that much discussion has been about whether or not there should be a Charter of Rights. On that particular issue, the ACBC does not take a particular stand at this stage." The Anglican General Synod said: "We support the enactment of human rights legislation because this has the potential to have a beneficial effect on government policy and the legislation and administration which give effect to that policy."¹ The Uniting Church National Assembly submitted: "The Uniting Church believes that a Human Rights Act, operating within Australia's system of open and democratic government, will provide greater protection for fundamental rights and freedoms, promote

¹ However the Sydney Anglicans then put it in a submission opposing a federal Human Rights Act.

dignity, address disadvantage and exclusion, and help to create a ‘human rights culture’ in Australia.”

As if that was not confusing enough, Cardinal Pell expressed outright opposition to a Charter in any form. Moving beyond the neutral position of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney co-operated in activities with the Australian Christian Lobby after the release of our report. The Lobby which describes itself as “a parachurch group” was opposed to a Human Rights Act in any form. For me and my committee members, it was difficult to get a handle on just who the Lobby represents.²

It became too complex a task to try and represent in the report the viewpoint of the various churches on a Human Rights Act. Thus we omitted all reference to same. I daresay this will become a common response by public inquiries which doubt the public’s interest in investigating the complex arrangements now in place for church leaders to express diverse views under various guises. So you won’t hear much from me tonight on where Christians DO stand on poverty and plenty. They stand everywhere from the grandeur of a Gothic Cathedral to the squalor of a homeless shelter run by Vinnies.

So then, where SHOULD Christians stand on plenty and poverty? I have never seen much utility in preaching AT people about wealth and poverty. Invoking Catholic guilt does not tend to get us very far, especially when the issue is money and the equitable distribution of wealth and resources. Early in my time when advocating Aboriginal land rights, I would often be troubled by readings from Joshua and Judges recalling the sporadic, progressive, relentless and bloody dispossession of the Canaanites, the Gibeonites, the Hivites and all those other groups who undoubtedly viewed themselves as the traditional owners of the land. When visiting Chartres Cathedral some years ago, I pondered whether it was better that the resources of 13th century provincial France be dedicated to that wonderful cathedral or to feeding the poor farm workers. Without straining the work to be done by the injunction what you should do with your wealth and what you should do about your neighbour’s poverty, allow me to morph the question in a less threatening and hopefully more productive fashion: “Poverty and Plenty: As a Christian, where do I want to stand? Where am I called to stand? Where do we want to stand as a community of believers? Where is the Lord inviting us, the community of believers, to stand?” From my years of involvement in public disputation about rights and justice, I start with one simple rule: where you stand depends on where you sit.

When you hear the story of Dives and Lazarus, with whom do you identify? (Lk 16:19-31) When you hear the parable of the prodigal son, with whom do you identify – the father, the naughty repentant boy returning home, or the surly goodie-goodie who risks nothing? (Lk 15:11-32) When you hear the story of the Good Samaritan, with whom do you identify? (Lk 10: 30-37) Jesus asked which of the three was neighbour to the bashed man on the road – the

² Jim Wallace, Executive Director of the Australian Christian Lobby provides an explanation of the ACL’s modus operandi at <http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aid=19116>.

priest, the Levite or the Samaritan. What about the innkeeper? We would be lost in our corporate, globalised world if we could only call on the stray Samaritan and not the endowed innkeepers who are better situated to provide sustained assistance to the chronically poor.

In 1988, I was invited back to Xavier College in Melbourne, where I had once taught Form 4 Mathematics. But this time I was asked to speak at the last religion class for the Form 6 (year 12) boys. It was the bicentenary year and all Australians, even those living in affluent suburbs without Aborigines, were focusing on the place of indigenous Australians. I told my oft-repeated story about the fringe-dwelling Aborigines from Mantaka near Kuranda in North Queensland. They were squatted beside the Barron River. Across the river was a multi-million-dollar weekend built by a Melbourne businessman who used to bring his family in by helicopter. The Year 12 boys asked all sorts of prying questions about the Aborigines and I was unable to give them satisfactory answers. They asked, "If Aborigines want houses, why don't they build them for themselves?", "What are they complaining about? If the white man did not come, they would not even have a water supply?", "What's wrong with the businessman having a holiday house? After all, if he did not earn a lot of money and pay his taxes, we would not be able to pay Aborigines for welfare?" In the end, I simply asked them one question in return, "Which side of the river are you standing on as you ask your questions?" Can you see that there are just as many unanswerable questions that you can ask from the other side of the river? Mind you, they are very different questions. At the end of the class, the new deputy headmaster could see that I was a little shaken up by the students' reactions to Aborigines who they had never met. He opined, "The good thing is that they are asking the same questions as anyone their age would ask." On one level, that was a good thing. But unlike many of their age group, they had just concluded five, seven, or twelve years of the best quality Jesuit education. What difference did it make in their asking of questions and in their searching for answers?

It often helps for us to move to the other side of the river, to place ourselves in the shoes of the other, to sit with the one who is so different from us. As we contemplate the parables, the blessings and the woe sayings of Luke, let's dance around from one side of the river to the other, imagining ourselves as different actors in the drama Jesus depicts.

I would judge tonight a failure if everyone went home and decided to give away all that they own, or (and this is more likely) everyone went home justified having decided to keep all they own and work even harder to acquire more. The call, the challenge, our yearning is to rid ourselves of inordinate attachments to our own wealth and then freely ask: What do I want to do with my plenty? What do I want to do to relieve my neighbour's poverty? Answering these questions, I will also decide where to draw the line, where to build the fence, where to enforce the border – with those inside being considered prospective neighbours and those outside beyond the scope of my good neighbourliness. Only with a religious disposition and mindset could we dare to take away all fences and borders aspiring to love all persons as our neighbours.

Being Christians (of whatever tradition) we come with five key attitudes to poverty and plenty:³

1. Economic poverty is an evil to be combated in the present time by the rich sharing their possessions with the needy poor.
2. Riches and possessions are obstacles to a life of discipleship and to entering the kingdom of God
3. Yahweh has a special love of the poor.
4. We are stewards of creation.
5. Even if we be materially rich (as most Australians are when compared with persons living in third world conditions or when compared with the living standards of earlier generations), Jesus calls us to spiritual poverty in the face of our human finitude and mortality.

Let me say an extra word about the second key attitude which is often contested by good church goers in stable middle class parishes in first world countries. When I was a Jesuit novice 35 years ago, it was very fashionable for the more earnest young novices to focus on this need for us to live lives of true material poverty if we were to emulate the life of Jesus (and for us Jesuits in the making, the way of Ignatius Loyola). In my novitiate there was a retired businessman who used grow weary of some of the prayers prepared by the young Turks invoking a life of poverty and deprivation. One night at prayer, the old fellow spoke his mind and pledged thereafter to remain silent, whereupon the convenor of the prayer read from Mark's gospel: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25). This was too much for our senior member. He erupted and explained with detailed exegesis that the eye of the needle was a small gate on the outskirts of Jerusalem. He said, "I have it on good authority that it can be done with a little bit of manoeuvring." We Christians are always looking for ways to stay sitting and standing just where we are, justifying our position and our stance "with a little bit of manoeuvring."

Discerning what we want and what we are called to, rather than what the good Reverends tell us that we should do, we are always prompted and pricked by Luke's beatitudes and woes: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God (6:20); But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation (6:24). Even if we espouse the same economic theories as Tony Abbott, Joe Hockey and Barnaby Joyce (the Coalition's trinity of economic spokespersons, all of whom attended Jesuit schools) we can still be inspired and challenged by Luke's vision of the early Christian community: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." (Acts 2:44-45) We can all be inspired by Barnabas who "sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet." (Acts 4:37). Mind you, I have always felt that Ananias and Sapphira got a very raw deal from the local church community. (Acts 5:1-11). They sold their land, and gave most of the proceeds to the church

³ See D. Harrington and J. Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics*, Lanham, Maryland, 2002, Ch. 9

community and the poor. But they kept a small percentage of the takings for themselves. And why shouldn't they? They did not disclose that to the apostles. But why should they? There they are: smitten and struck dead. No wonder the scriptures record: "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events." I think it was not only outrageous. It was most unjust.

Deciding what we want to do with our wealth and how we want to help those in need, we Christians attempt to live out the theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. We do what we do because we believe in a loving God, because we have hope in salvation for all, and because we want to love our companions and the stranger as we love ourselves. We also want to live the cardinal virtues: justice, temperance, fortitude and prudence. All these virtues are relevant when we come to use our wealth in response to the call to follow Jesus.

We respond not just individually but also as members of the believing community, the pilgrim people of God. Recently I attended a board meeting of our Jesuit Social Services at which we were planning a major fund raising campaign. We decided to give public credit to those individuals who made substantial financial contributions to our work. But then we wrestled with a few tensions. If we honoured the millionaire who gave out of his excess, what about the widow's mite? (Mk 12:41-4) What about the Ash Wednesday injunction to conduct our almsgiving in secret (Mt 6:2-4):

So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honoured by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honoured by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

You might think it unduly Jesuitical but we decided in the end that we would pay public tribute to our wealthy donors if that would better help us to help the poor with more resources.

These issues are unlikely to be resolved by recourse to injunctions from church leaders. It has never worked that way. The scriptures speak to us very bluntly during Lenten season. Jesus tells the crowds and his disciples to listen to what the scribes and Pharisees have to say: "Do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach." (Mt 23:3) It's easy to label religious leaders of any age or of any religious tradition as hypocrites. That can be a cop out for not doing the hard thing, the right thing, or the better thing. Jesus goes well beyond the teaching of his predecessors telling us, "The greatest among you will be your servant." (Mt 23:11) Simple direct action and humble service are the call.

A recurring theme in the Old Testament readings for Lent is the call: "seek justice". But what is justice? Isaiah gives us three simple items on the checklist: "rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." (Is 1:17) Do something for those who have no one

and who have nothing. Extend your circle of concern to those who are not your own, to those who will not be able to reciprocate, to those who do not have political power or influence, to those who do not feature in the media. Charity begins at home but it comes into its own when practiced on the streets and in the public square.

Though the Hebrew Scriptures graphically recount the wholesale dispossession of peoples from their lands, the Chosen People are called to love the alien (Deut 11:17-19):

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the orphan and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.

In his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI, reflects on the parable of the Good Samaritan and says, “Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbour.” He puts the challenge, particularly to the laity of the Church: “Building a just social and civil order, wherein each person receives what is his or her due, is an essential task which every generation must take up anew.” He says “the direct duty to work for a just ordering of society is proper to the lay faithful.” So there are some matters on which we cannot be waiting for the clergy to show us how – even the Pope has told us Catholics so! Even if our politicians and bureaucrats get the policy settings right, the Pope reminds us, “There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love.” There will always be a need for Christian charity, no matter what the policies coming out of Canberra. Pope Benedict has made his own the call by his predecessor John Paul II: we Christians need to speak with a united voice working to inculcate “respect for the rights and needs of everyone, especially the poor, the lowly and the defenceless”. But often we cannot agree even theoretically on what is just, and what are people’s rights.

When I studied philosophy more than 30 years ago, the guru on justice was Harvard professor John Rawls who wrote a book *A Theory of Justice*. He was in the social contract mould, proposing a simple thought experiment. Imagine everyone is placed behind a veil of ignorance where they do not know what their attributes, interests or place in society will be. In this Original Position, people would then choose a list of suitable arrangements to which they would be bound or to which they would voluntarily comply. Everyone would be entitled to the same list of basic liberties. The key offices in society would be open to everyone without discrimination. The unequal distribution of goods and opportunities would be justified in so far as it assisted the worst off in society to be better off than they would have been if no unequal distribution were permitted. For 30 years, social philosophers made their mark by agreeing or disagreeing with Rawls.

The philosopher Amartya Sen who won the Nobel Peace Prize for Economics has just published a book *The Idea of Justice*. He gives a simple example of three children and a flute. Bob is very poor and would like to have the flute because he has nothing else to play with. Carla made the flute and wants to keep it. Anne is the only one of the three children who knows how to play the flute and she plays it beautifully bringing pleasure to all who hear her.

Who has the best claim on the flute? Sen tells us that the economic egalitarian would give it to Bob. The libertarian would insist that Carla retain the fruits of her labour. Most Australians without a second thought would simply assert, “Carla made it; it’s hers; the rest should stop complaining; if they want a flute they should make their own!” The utilitarian hedonist would give it to Anne. Fortunately we have more than one flute to appropriate for education, health and social services in Australia. The resources are divisible. What are the relevant considerations when it comes to distributing our wealth? Resources for the poorest? Resources for those who would most profit by them? Resources for those who can afford them? These are real tensions for all of us making judgments on formulae for the allocation of our individual and collective wealth.

Last year after completing the National Human Rights Consultation I visited Pakistan. The security situation was not good. In Lahore, all schools were completing the construction of 9-foot high stone fences, the installation of security cameras, and the employment of armed guards and personnel to conduct personal security searches of all entrants to school grounds including children. I had the opportunity to visit one of the most elite schools in the country – the Convent of Jesus and Mary which commenced educating girls in 1876. The school is now co-educational – providing English medium education to the elite of Pakistani Muslim society as well as Urdu medium education to children from the poorer Christian minority. I was shown over the school at some length. It has splendid grounds and facilities in the heart of bustling Lahore. The elderly British sister who was conducting my tour kept the best until last as we entered the Thevenet Centre for Special Education opened just ten years ago. At the opening, the Sister Provincial explained the origin of the centre which was named after St Claudine Thevenet who established this religious congregation:

In the summer of 1998 one our parents who has a son with special needs, expressed the desire that her child attend our school somehow, somewhere. At that stage we had no provision as such for children with special needs, but it was her request that gave birth to the idea of starting Thevenet Centre, and for this we thank her. The Sisters of Jesus & Mary are proud to say that they have been educating the girls of Lahore since 1876. It seemed only right then, that at the dawn of a new millennium they should venture forth into a new branch of education and provide for children, not with disabilities, but with different abilities.

That Thevenet Centre is at the heart of one of the wealthiest schools in Pakistan. In the midst of relative wealth, it provides a place of belonging and learning for the neediest of children. Whatever the plight of children on the streets outside those school gates, I thought it was money well spent.

We need to theorise; we need to discuss and disagree; we need to pray; but in the end, we always come back to wanting to do (and being called to do) the practical thing for the oppressed, the widow and the orphan. Being stewards of creation, we Christians want to share what we have. Out of our excess we want to contribute to alleviate the plight of those who are involuntarily poor and thus deprived of the material things needed for their full human flourishing and choice - which may include a voluntary decision to forego material things, living in imitation of Christ poor.

I wish you safe home. If you want my advice, don't go home tonight and give it all away. Don't go home smug with all you have intent on getting even more. Do go home open to the invitation to join Jesus and his closest companions on the other side of the river. Share a meal with them. Share what you have. Share your story and listen to theirs. "Learn to do good, search for justice." (Is 1:17)