

Inclusive Church - Rich and Poor (economic power)

James 2:1-9

Matthew 26:6 - 13

I've noticed some things during the inclusive church journey

All the things we're talking about are differences. - gender, race, sexuality. Differences that mean people get treated differently, differences that mean its harder for some people to be in church, physically or mentally, differences that make it harder for us to accept some people.

There are differences we can see - race, disability, gender

There are differences we don't see - mental health, sexuality

Today we look at the only difference we may have some control over, some choice - The difference of Rich and poor - also called economic power

And its got very deep roots in the church! From the Jews who say that money and wealth was a sign of blessing from God - think about how many sheep and goats Abraham had, or King David had. And if someone has God's blessing (and they're rich) why wouldn't you want to be on their side or curry favour? Some of that blessing might rub off on you.

Jesus shocked people by saying - the rich? Easier for a camel to go through a needle!

But the favouritism of the rich continued - so obvious and unsubtle and unhelpful, that St James, our st James, in his wonderful letter - makes a point of telling them - stop favouring the rich!! Its not ok, its not godly, its not holy.

Now again, difference - that's what we're really talking about with being an inclusive church - are we open, can we be open to people who are different? Is God open to that? And so many differences are literally black and white - or pretty clearly definable, you're either one or the other - if you're straight, you're not gay, but wealth is relative - it depends where you're standing.

In my last parish, which was in the bottom 22% of poorest places in the country (It rank about 2,000'th out of 12,000) and I was one of the more wealthy people - the car we drove, the ability to go on holiday, etc

In this parish (in the top 10% in the country) I am one of the poorest people.

Yet my stipend would be the same if I was working full time.

You may think you're financially well off or not - but look - compared to those who live in Westminster in London, you're poor, but compared to a lot of Liverpool or Middlesborough you're There's a big gap.

And everyone in the UK is in the top few % in the world!

And as much as sexuality is a divisive issue, how wealthy you are or how you feel is even more so. In America its good to be rich, its taken for granted that's the goal, and the rich are looked up to, admired. In China, some wealthy social influencers who flaunt their wealth have recently had their accounts frozen - too much wealth is not good.

In Britain, its ok to be rich as long as 1) you don't flaunt it, or flaunt it within limits, 2) its ok if its inherited - like Lord Cranborne or someone (I've never understood that) and the golden rule 3) as long as you're seen to be generous, to help others, to give to good causes.

So although there is an absolute level of poverty - I think around \$1.90 a day at the moment - only a small % of the world is on that - for the rest of us, wealth and poverty are relative to our culture and where we live.

Which is why I like the Inclusive church statement that says - regardless off economic power..

Beucase it is not to do with amount, but to do with recognising the power difference that it gives you.

As we've looked since January at Inclusive Church, and its various themes - this is the only one, apart from sexuality, that we're doing more than once. And the last person to preach on this, was Christine - she talked about USPG, and she made these points.

We often think that the church so do things FOR the poor. We should give to food-banks, look after the homeless, support charities. Its even one of the aims of the church of England - helping people who are in need practically and financially. And we know that Jesus did - raising a widow's only son from death - she had no other income - no husband and then no son - if he hand't raised her - she'd be a beggar. Or feeding the 5,000 - that's a huge food-bank.

So Of course, yes, Christians should care for and look after the Poor.

However - how does it make you feel when you recieve charity? Its not nice. I've seen people crying with shame because they have to go to a Food-bank. I've worked in several areas which were poor, and the rich would drive in, say - what can I do to help? Throw some cash around, and then drive home. It happened in Salisbury, in Birmingham, in London. When you treat The Poor that way.. its degrading, its not respectful.

But helping the poor is a first step. Its not bad in some ways.

A better thing, is to be a church that does things, not FOR the poor, but WITH the poor.

So engaging with USPG, to get alongside people, to say - what do you need, what would you like?

And what can you give us in return? It allows for equality, for mutual respect.

But the best thing - is to be a church OF the poor.

That is - a church that recognises that we are poor ourselves, that places itself in the position of poverty, rather than wealth. That's very upside down Kingdom. The world tells us to be rich, that money is safety - in money we trust. How's your pension etc? Imagine being a church that said - I don't have anything - everything I have belongs to God and is temporary. I stand alongside those who don't have enough food, who have to use a pre-pay electric meter which is on a higher tariff than those of us who can pay by direct debit. We are poor - in our minds, in our understanding of the world, in our love of god, blessed are the poor - for they shall be rich.

And to be OF the poor, would be to recognise that the money we have - is a responsibility.

We have been given power, levers to change things.

Are we going to use them? How are we going to use them?

Its very interesting - there are 5 marks of mission that the World Council of Churches agreed on 20 years ago or so -

Tell, Teach, Tend, Treasure, Transform

Tell the good news,

teach people to be disciples

Tend one another, acts of service

Treasure the environment

Transform unjust structures of society.

Well, I've been in a lot of churches over the years - and some were better at the Tending, and some were better at Telling, we're pretty good at Treasuring the environment - but I cannot think of 1 single church that does anything to transform the unjust structures of society.

If we were a Church OF the poor - we would ask

- why universal credit is so poorly run
 - Why our prisons are so crowded and there's such a high return rate
 - Why those who are rich get better health care - privately - do they deserve that?
- Is that right?

Because if you're poor, those are the questions you ask, because it affects you.

Being a church that is inclusive to all people, regardless of their economic power, yes starts with not showing favouritism to the wealthy, but beyond that, there's a huge journey about how we feel about wealth and status, and what we really trust in. And whether what we think and feel is in any way in line with what God says about it.

Someone in the last couple of weeks said - This Inclusive Church things, its more about us, and our attitudes, than God, isn't it?

And that's right.

When we look at - are we inclusive, should we be inclusive, who do we exclude
We can become painfully aware of our own inbuilt biases and prejudices.

I was talking to someone the other week and I said - oh you could see a doctor about that, he'll help you.

Then I heard what I'd said. HE. He'll help you.

The doctor could be a woman! Probably is a woman. After 50 years of me being a feminist, I discover I'm still sexist!

Or there were some lovely coloured nurses in hospital - what? WHY WAS THAT RELEVANT

Or sexuality - assuming its their wife

And we do it with rich and poor all the time - we think everyone is like us, has the same ability or economic power as we do.

So, we're going to vote at the end of the service. And some people have said - Why doesn't the inclusive church statement just say "We are a church that welcome all people"?

Why does it have to spell out - mental health, gender, race, sexuality?

But I can't see the issue with that. If we are a church that welcome all, because we believe that God welcomes all - then all means all - height, eye colour, weight
The reason race and gender and wealth and sexuality are mentioned - is because that's often where people are discriminated against.

And in a world where many people think the church and Christians are anti-gay and basically that God hates gay people, we have to do something to show them that that's not true, and joining Inclusive Church might be the only way of showing that.

Please read the statement before you vote - it does not say we 'promote' anything, it doesn't say we want gay blessings or everyone should be trans - it says we won't **discriminate**.

In my last church, some people were worried that we'd be flooded out with all sorts of weird and wonderful people if we said we were inclusive. In fact some said they wanted to be inclusive but not publicise it. We gained nobody new. As I said at the beginning, not everyone agreed, but nobody left the church. We accepted each other's differences. And we learnt a lot. Just to remind you this is straw poll, not a referendum or election. It will guide the PCC on Tuesday, and generally the Church of England looks for at least a 2/3rds majority for any major decisions, so the PCC are looking for a clear direction.