

ADVENT REFLECTION 2018

Week 2: Building the Kingdom

*They go out, they go out, full of tears
Carrying seed for the sowing;
They come back, they come back, full of song,
carrying their sheaves.*

Psalm 125: 6

A knock-on effect of increasing poverty in the UK has been the scandalous necessity for food banks. Young people, unable to find work; families existing as best they can on or below the poverty line; elderly people struggling to make ends meet: all age groups are turning to food banks for survival.

Changes to the benefit system with the controversial Universal Credit mean the poorest are now even worse off than before. For some there is the stark choice of putting food on the table versus paying this week's rent.

At Christmas time especially the pressures on the very poorest escalate to an unbearable level. Parents are forced into the hands of loan sharks in order to buy toys for their children. Credit Unions play a valuable role, but borrowing is only possible if some cash has already been invested and so those who need help most may be excluded.

By contrast there is also great wealth. Some of the richest people and most profitable companies in the UK use schemes to avoid paying their fair share of taxes: legally permissible but morally reprehensible.

In our commitment to Justice and Peace what can we do to ensure that everyone, especially the poorest and most vulnerable amongst us, is able to sing a joyful song?

Today we cannot be satisfied simply with being aware of the problems faced by many of our brothers and sisters. It is not enough to offer broad reflections or engage in endless discussion, constantly repeating things everyone knows. We need to 'de-naturalise' extreme poverty, to stop seeing it as a statistic rather than a reality. Why? Because poverty has a face! It has the face of a child; it has the face of a family; it has the face of people, young and old. It has the face of widespread unemployment and lack of opportunity. It has the face of forced migrations, and of empty or destroyed homes.

Pope Francis, Meeting of executive board of World Food Programme, June 2016

• *Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, has pulled no punches in his assessment of the UK's treatment of the poor. Read the full report (released November 2018) from the UN Human Rights website:*
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23881&LangID=E>

*A voice cries in the wilderness:
Prepare a way for the Lord,
Make his paths straight.
Every valley will be filled in,
Every mountain and hill be laid low,
Winding ways will be straightened
And rough roads made smooth.
And all mankind shall see the salvation of God.*

Luke 3:4-6

God's time for saving action for all has arrived. In a world where great value is put on personal achievements and possessions it takes exceptional humility and courage to let go of our own ambitions and desires in order to shift the focus to loving God and our neighbour.

Christ is present

*Into this world, this demented inn,
in which there is absolutely no room for him at all,
Christ has come uninvited.*

*But because he cannot be at home in it,
because he is out of place in it,
and yet he must be in it,
his place is with those others who do not belong,
who are rejected by power
because they are regarded as weak,
those who are discredited,
who are denied the status of persons,
tortured, exterminated.*

*With those for whom there is no room,
Christ is present in this world.*

*He is mysteriously present in those for whom
there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.*

Thomas Merton

Action Ideas

- Become a member of Church Action on Poverty www.church-poverty.org.uk
- Volunteer at a Drop-in Centre for homeless people or help at a Soup Kitchen
- Help out at a local Food Bank or Credit Union
- Make sure what you buy is fairly and ethically traded
- Spend less on presents and make a donation to Housing Justice www.housingjustice.org.uk
- This Christmas give the gift of a fruit tree or a packet of seeds
- Design and make hand-made cards and gifts or bake Christmas biscuits for family and friends
- Give the gift of your time and companionship: visit an elderly neighbour who lives alone or befriend someone who is new to your area