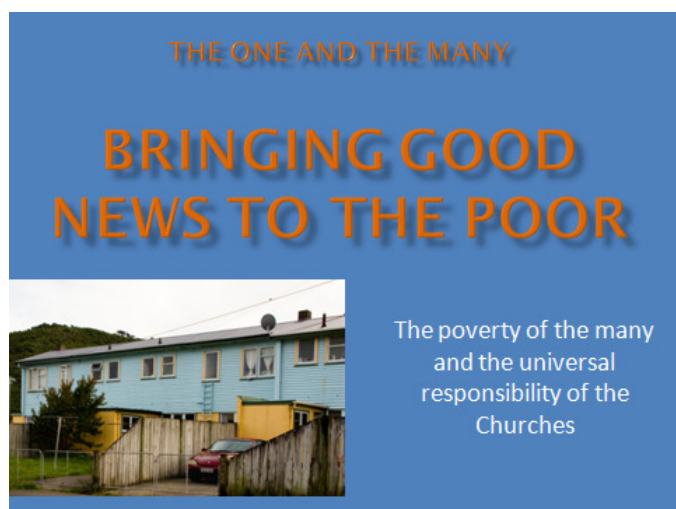


The Poverty of the Many and the Universal responsibility of the Churches
Wellington Theological Symposium
Lisa Beech - 18 August 2012



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Tēnā koutou katoa. Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou kua tae mai nei i tēnei rā ki te kōrero mō te kotahitanga o ngā hāhi. Ko tēnei taku mihi ki a koutou. Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I was honoured and terrified by your invitation. There are many ways of responding to the questions you posed for me, but at their heart it seemed to me that what I was being asked to say is

- What does it mean to live out Christ's mission bring good news to the poor?
- And how do we work together to do that, given our different understandings and experience of the good news, of mission and possibly most of all, of poverty?



My own answers to these questions start with my own reality, as they will for each of you here today.

The lens through which I have always viewed matters of poverty has been the example and teachings of the Catholic Church concerning God's love of the poor. I grew up through the tumultuous years in which the Catholic church in New Zealand was starting to understand there are structural causes to poverty and injustice, and that we are called to speak out about them. Currently I feel privileged to contribute to that mission through working for Caritas, the Catholic Church's agency for justice, peace and development.

But I also view this mission through the lens of my own life. There are areas where my life fertile soil to hear God's word. In the area of economic justice, that ground was prepared by my mother's tears. She spoke many times of the deprivation her family experienced,

especially in 1951 when her father was locked out for a year in an industrial dispute that divided the town of Lithgow in the Blue Mountains of Australia.

There are other areas of my life where the Gospel message fell on rockier ground and had a harder time getting through. I had to clear away a lot of debris to be able to face up to the reality of colonisation and the ongoing ways in which this affects the tangata whenua of this land and of our region. It was much later in my life that this ground was finally softened to hear God's word, this time by the tears of my daughter as she experienced over and over again a racism that many New Zealanders still do not want to believe exists in this country. And of course there will be areas that I don't even know yet that I am blind too, because I have allowed thorns to choke the seedlings or birds to carry away and eat the seeds.

The sower and the seed



So as I prepare to speak to you, I am conscious of the parable of the sower and the seed, and the many different experiences that have prepared the soil on which falls the seeds I bring to scatter today. I also come with a sense of what I am and what I am not; many of you are scholars in a way that I can only aspire to be. Unlike many of your other speakers, I do not bring a scholar's breadth of knowledge of theological writings and

arguments. No doubt my life and my work would benefit from this. But what I do bring are reflections based on a life that has been spent trying to be as faithful as I can be to the guidance Catholic social teaching gives me in understanding what it means to follow Christ in bringing good news to the poor.

Your topic of One and the Many contains many possibilities in relation to poverty. In the way the questions are framed, there is the question of how do we overcome our ecclesial differences and bring our diverse perspectives together to work in a unified way for social justice. But it is also important to ask the question of how do we overcome our own backgrounds. How do we overcome our current realities of class and race to be able to link Christians who may or may not have experienced poverty with people of all faiths and people of no faith who live with the grinding, brutal reality of it? How do we overcome our separation and aloneness to be able to join together in solidarity?

The One and the Many theme also has particular resonance in relation to poverty. The Occupy Movement's slogan "We are the 99 percent" points to their analysis that more and more of the world's wealth is owned and controlled by a smaller and smaller group, the One percent. However, this does need a reality check. I know I am not in the one percent. But that doesn't mean that I am among the poorest either.

Although the Minister of Social Development has notoriously said this week that she doesn't want to put a measure child poverty, if we take her own Green Paper's assessment that 20 percent of New Zealand children live in poverty, that means that many other New Zealand children do not live in poverty. Unlike many parts of the world, being poor in New Zealand is a minority experience.

Many of us have been touched by poverty, and all of us are affected by the growing gap between the rich and the poor. But what does it mean to be poor in a society where most people are not? The One and the Many in our context sometimes means feeling like you are the only person in the group who has to say no when someone suggests going out for a cup of coffee, or you are the only child in the classroom who never has a birthday party. It means laughing off holes in shoes and pretending raincoats are unnecessary, and making lame excuses not to visit relatives because there isn't any money for a bus fare. That might seem a far cry from the poverty of the poor man Lazarus at the gate of the rich man, but the story is as relevant to us in our increasingly unequal, divided society as it was in Christ's time. Let's remember it as it is told in Luke 16:

'There was a rich man who used to dress in purple and fine linen and feast magnificently every day.

²⁰ And at his gate there used to lie a poor man called Lazarus, covered with sores,

²¹ who longed to fill himself with what fell from the rich man's table. Even dogs came and licked his sores.

²² Now it happened that the poor man died and was carried away by the angels into Abraham's embrace. The rich man also died and was buried.

²³ 'In his torment in Hades he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off with Lazarus in his embrace.

²⁴ So he cried out, "Father Abraham, pity me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames."

²⁵ Abraham said, "My son, remember that during your life you had your fill of good things, just as Lazarus his fill of bad. Now he is being comforted here while you are in agony.

Abraham goes on to say that a huge gulf has been fixed, so the rich man can never pass across to Lazarus's side. In the parable, the gulf between rich and poor in daily life is fixed after death.

Many New Zealanders are aware of the immense gulf between the way people live in our country and the extreme poverty suffered by millions throughout the developing world. Sometimes it is easier to love people who are far away in the abstract than to notice and respond to the poverty at our own gate.

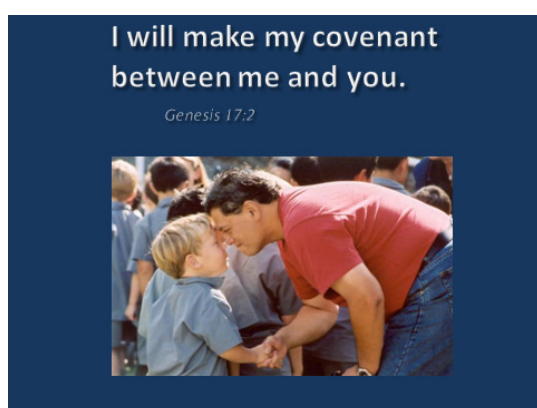
As Caritas said about this Gospel story in our Social Justice Week booklet last year, we are not told *why* the rich man ignored Lazarus – only that he did. Maybe he thought Lazarus was lazy, or that he thought Lazarus had made ‘poor choices’ or that giving him food scraps would encourage a ‘dependency mentality’. There are many excuses we make for ignoring the needs of the poor. However, the rich man is ultimately held to account for his behaviour towards Lazarus.

You asked me what is the universal responsibility of the Churches for the pursuit of social justice that would raise people out of poverty? And what is the Gospel mandate?

I’ll start with my own personal explanation of the Biblical foundations of justice. You might want to bear in mind as I say this that I am a person who once when asked in a job interview if I had ever belonged to a political party, blurted out without much thought that the Bible was my political manifesto. I got the job in spite of that, and while I wouldn’t really describe the Bible as a manifesto, perhaps you might consider this a 15-slide explanation of the roots of Biblical justice from the perspective of a Bible-reading political protestor.




- For me the story starts with God creating a world that is good, in God separating light from darkness.



- It continues with the Covenental relationship between God and his people which is the basis for understanding how we relate to God and each other. I think of the Covenant as a hongi, a constant sharing of breath.



- Then there is the extraordinary reality of God who intervenes in human history to save his loved ones from suffering, the out-of-Egypt bringing God.



Choose life
so that you
and your
descendants
may live.

Deuteronomy 30:19

- And the deliberate choosing of life by the saved people, when faced with the despair of the desert.



When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them **for the poor and for the alien.**

Leviticus 23:22

- The next chapter in the story concerns the enlightenment of seeking a Sabbath economy, a Jubilee economy, in which workers and the land are given time to rest, and in which debts are forgiven rather than continuing to bind future generations.

You will also **love the stranger,**
for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10:19



- It tells of a way of living which specifically protects the vulnerable – the widow and orphan, the solo mothers of Biblical times – and the stranger, based on the recent and vivid memories of the experience of oppression in Egypt.



What do you mean
by crushing my people,
by grinding the face of the poor?

Isaiah 3:15

- Racing through and past centuries of wisdom, it is also the story of the prophets who saw and denounced injustice, and who reminded God's people of what worship really meant.

Let justice fl



If you offer your food to
the hungry, and satisfy
the needs of the afflicted,

**then your light
shall rise in the
darkness.**

Isaiah 58:10





- Moving into the times of Christ, we start with the rejoicing of Mary at her pregnancy with a historic song of God as protector of the lowly and bringer of the downfall of the mighty.

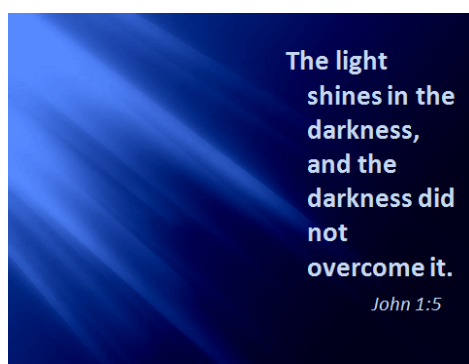
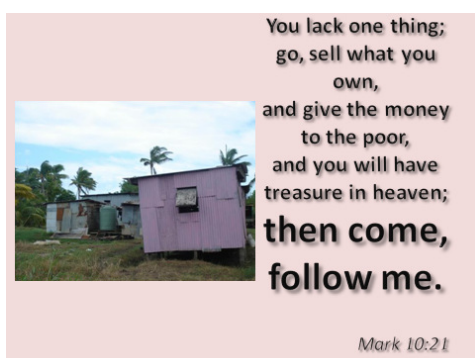


- And next we have Christ's proclamation at the start of his ministry that he is sent to bring good news to the poor. This moment is deeply important, not just because he said he would do it, but because he did it. The words of Jesus about poverty are deeply important, but even more so is his example he made in seeking out the company of the poor, the marginalised, the despised. This is a man who hung out with people that some politicians might say need a good kick up the pants.



- Again without doing justice to the breadth of Christ's message, three touchstones for me; Blessed are you who are poor! ; the call to give up what we have to follow Christ; and his complete identification with those who are hungry, thirsty, sick, in prison – whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters you do to me. Our Covenantal relationship, our daily hongis with God, is in recognising Christ in

the poorest.



- And of the death and resurrection of Christ, the social justice message is only one of essential

messages that springs from this experience, but it is from that experience that we take this hope, **the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not put it out.**

From this depth of our shared religious experience springs all our shared rich, diverse, united history of social justice activity among the churches.

My own answer to the question of the universal responsibility of the Churches is that it starts with our own responsibility as Christians. We have both a personal responsibility and a collective responsibility. What we can do as individuals, as families and as communities we should do. What we can do collectively as a society working through the machinery of government we should do.

It is too easy for discussions about responsibility for social wellbeing to degenerate into discussions of who bears ultimate responsibility, which is a way of people trying to let themselves off the hook. That leads to discussions and debates in which the State tries to abdicate responsibility for the poor to Churches and communities, or individuals abdicate responsibility to the poor to nameless others.

We are all called, each one of us, to respond to our neighbour, to share our bread with the hungry, not to pass by on the other side of the road when we see someone in need. We are all called to regard what we are given by God as being at the service of others.

But we can never meet all needs as individuals, especially when you are poor living in a poor street in a poor neighbourhood and everyone's cupboards are bare. It would be nice to think that Churches and communities can reach out to each other, and they can and they do, but first Khandallah needs to know that Naenae is suffering, and to be willing and organised and able to do something about it.

So it is important that collectively as a society we act together through the systems of government to put in place systems and structures that protect the poorest. Christians cannot avoid or neglect these responsibilities more than we can our personal ones. And we cannot allow States to abandon those responsibilities because individuals, communities and Churches cannot and do not provide an adequate safety net.

The tradition out of which I work is Catholic social teaching, which is the application of the Church's moral principles to social and political issues. Other Christian traditions work out of different theology, different forms of worship, different calls, different vocations, different histories, different life experiences. That makes us rich and varied as we are meant to be. Differences do exist, and I don't believe we are all meant to be the same, or to submerge our identities in uniformity.

However, the important question is whether we can overcome our particular differences in times when the Churches need to speak with a unified voice. And can we even jointly agree

and identify when those moments are? The Churches were united and effective public advocates about poverty in the 1990s. Their example continues to inspire and motivate me. Can we do that again? Presently there are voices that say in ecumenical conversations that speaking out may make us feel better but they ask whether it really changes anything in Parliament. They say perhaps we can be more effective moving quietly as political insiders, affecting political decisions, than in making ourselves feel important making grand statements that don't change anything.

There is likely to be validity in these concerns. But I come from a perspective that says that when the Church speaks out on social justice, it is not primarily about *speaking truth to power*. It is rather carrying out Christ's mission to proclaim the good news to the poor – it is **speaking truth to the powerless**.

Does it make any difference? I'm going to answer that with my own story.

The year was 1993, and I was a domestic purposes beneficiary with a young daughter, still reeling from the emotional turmoil of the relationship that I had gained and lost, with all the grief and unrealistic hope that swirled around my heart. Living in Feilding, I drifted into the Unemployed Support Centre, where I met other beneficiaries. During my two years in Feilding, both freezing works closed down, and the maximum security psychiatric hospital at Lake Alice began discharging patients into our community. The 1991 benefit cuts were just starting to hit, market rents were being introduced for state houses, and for anyone who was still working the Employment Contracts Act was affecting workplace after workplace as penal rates, allowances and collective action was lost.

At the unemployed support centre, we were lost and lonely; we knew ourselves to be despised by many people in the town. But to begin we all believed employment was just around the corner, and that we wouldn't be beneficiaries for long. To begin with, some of us were still in that phase when shoes we had bought before we went on a benefit didn't have any holes in them, and some of the clothes in our cupboards had once been new. Some of us thought we were just going through a temporary blip in our lives, and we carried our own stereotype of beneficiaries around in our heads. We called people we thought were closer to that reality than us "Guppies" - Genuinely Unemployed Persons. But you didn't need to be on a benefit long to pick up the vibes.

One day a well dressed woman drew up in her flash car and after dropping off a bag of second hand clothes for our little stall turned and said "You're just a load of bludgers". It was the first time I had encountered someone who professed to help the poor while hating us. Another day I was playing piano in at Mass, with my baby daughter sitting on my knee and adding the odd extra note, when a fellow parishioner with an anti-abortion sticker on her car snapped at me: "if you have to bring that bastard child to Mass, you could at least learn to control her". And I thought my neighbour's twitching curtain was just insatiable curiosity until I learned that she had doxxed me in as a benefit fraud because a young man

in a blue car visited me on Wednesday afternoons – actually Fr Peter McDermott from St Brigid's parish coming for a weekly liturgy meeting.

After a few more of these encounters, I didn't just know that we were despised; more importantly, I began to despise myself. Moments of embarrassment turned to agonising nights of deep humiliation and shame. As the weeks on a benefit turned into months and then years, and as the struggle to make ends meet got harder, I no longer needed other people to tell me I was worthless. I would lie awake in my bed and tell it to myself.

In the midst of this awful time of my life, the Church Leaders issued their 1993 Social Justice statement, and we decided to run a weekly discussion group on their Making Choices programme at the Feilding Unemployed Centre. We had wide ranging discussions which rarely stuck to the topic, but I remember vividly the day we read this gem from the Church Leaders statement:

There is a dangerous tendency to project blame on to the needy as though they are the authors of their own misfortune. The truth for most is that they are the unwilling victims of systems and policies which overlook their needs.

The sense of relief and wonder that I felt when I read that is with me still. Even though I had an intellectual appreciation that everything that was happening to us in the 1990s was not all my fault, in my heart I was starting to believe it was. I thought the Church Leaders had written that paragraph just for us, in the Feilding Unemployed Support Centre, as well they might. It was a moment of bringing good news to the poor – a moment of feeling recognised and loved.

The 1993 Church Leaders' social justice statement might not have immediately changed the direction of government; it may not have immediately changed the opinions of wealthy and middle-class New Zealanders. Over time, it contributed to doing both those things; it was part of the process that led to the 1998 Hiko of Hope when the Churches led the march to Parliament to protest the direction of social and economic policy. But it had an immediate impact on our group at the Feilding Unemployed Support Centre; it spoke directly to us. It told us we were not worthless. It told us "Blessed are you who are poor!"

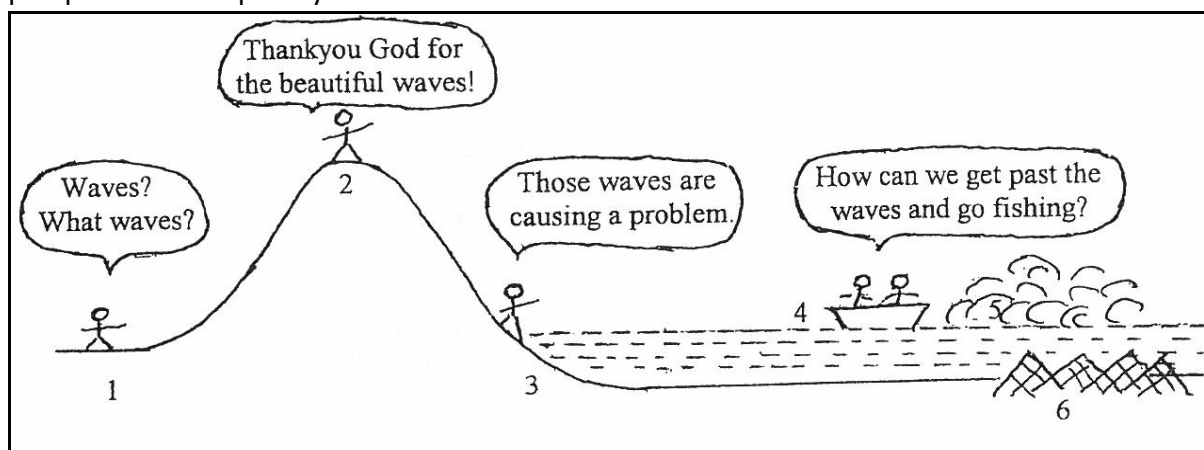
It didn't take away all the sting. Knowing Cardinal Tom was saying wonderful things in Wellington didn't make up for the attitudes of the people on the Church pews next to me. It didn't pay our rent or put food in the cupboard or stop the power getting cut off. But it needed to be said, and it was said, and **it was heard**. And that made it easier for me to hold on to a sense of myself, which I saw disappear in so many other beneficiaries.

Next year we have the 20th anniversary of that 1993 Social Justice statement. The issues that led Churches to take to the streets are all vividly with us again; significant changes to benefits, changes to housing policy and provision, changes to employment relations waiting in the wings, cuts to health and education spending.

Would a beneficiary in Feilding hear the good news to the poor in the way I did? Firstly, the unemployed support centre is long gone, as are the similar centres in most parts of the country. Where could a group of beneficiaries get together as we did in 1993? If they could connect as we did, would a Church Leaders' statement be their choice of reading material? And would there be anything for them to read, and to hear, if they did?

Beneficiaries right now are even more frightened than we were in 1993. As we learned during the work of the Alternative Welfare Working Group, the release of personal information of beneficiaries who opposed the changes to the Training Incentive Allowance has very effectively silenced the voices of the most vulnerable who will be affected by the government's welfare reforms. The Minister's public lack of repentance this week is only going to reinforce that feeling. And we need to hear those voices.

Many years ago, Fr John Curnow introduced me to this diagram of the reef. It says that our perspective is shaped by where we are.



In the picture a reef is causing turbulent waves out at sea. The people in the boat know immediately and directly about the reef and its impact because they are coping with it. Some people are on the beach, and are able to see what is happening. Others are far enough away on a hilltop that they see only an idyllic scene, and say how beautiful the waves are without recognising the troubles of those in the boat. Others are so far away, on the other side of the hill, that they don't even know there are waves.

John Curnow posed for us the question – where was the Jesus of Biblical times in this picture? Our answer was that he chose to get in the boat. He didn't have to make that choice, but that's what he did. Choosing to be in the boat didn't mean that Jesus doesn't love everyone else in the picture. But wherever there is a reef, then Christ is particularly present with and represented in the people in the boat.

Do Christians individually and Churches as communities of Christians meet our responsibilities for social justice more by directing our attention towards changing the

attitudes of the people at the top of the hill, or in ensuring the people struggling in the boat hear the good news? Both have to be done. But the Good News for the Poor is good news indeed for the people in the boat. It is not always such good news for the people on the hill. In my work I always remember that the audience for our material is not only the Pākehā middle-class Christians that may be the most obvious supporters. What will Māori think of Caritas publications? What will Caritas work say to beneficiaries, to refugees? How do different groups see themselves portrayed. What does “we” mean – who is it including or excluding?

So, what does today’s theme of the One and the Many mean for our work against poverty? Naturally it means finding the common ground in responding to poverty from our different religious and theological traditions. But I think the bigger challenge is to overcome the gap between the rich man and Lazarus, which is the gap between the person on the top of the hill and the person in the boat. There are Christians who are poor, and Christians who are not poor but who understand poverty, and there are Christians who don’t know about poverty and do not want to know about poverty. And there are Christians who have become rich out of processes which have impoverished others.

In attempting to respond as Churches to poverty, it can be as hard to overcome our socio-economic differences as it is to overcome our ecclesial differences. If rich and poor Christians cannot speak to each other, we may have little of worth to say to people of other faiths and people of no faiths. Can the gap be overcome between the One who is rich and the Many – the 99 percent - who are not? Or between the One who is poor in a society where Many are not? Can we find new ways to bring the Good News to the poor?

The Churches have done it before. They got it together in 1993, and I am starting to understand what that must have cost and how much effort that must have been. But I heard that voice in the midst of my despair. We can and must find the way to bring the good news to the poor of today, in a way that they can also hear and respond to it.

In the Eucharistic community to which I belong, it’s traditional to end with a waiata. All these past months of worrying about what I was going to say to you today, I’ve had a hymn buzzing around in my head that I haven’t sung for at least 25 years. The verse goes:

Don’t worry what you have to say
Don’t worry because on that day
God’s spirit will speak in your heart
Will speak in your heart.

And what I have tried to share with you today is actually the refrain of that hymn, so I’ll let those words be my closing:

He sent me to bring the good news to the poor
Tell prisoners that they are prisoners no more
Tell blind people that they can see

And set the downtrodden free

And go tell everyone the news that the kingdom of God has come

And go tell everyone, the news that God's kingdom has come.