
The University, the Church, and the Poor

Revelation 1.6

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 15, 2007 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

Why are people poor? And what can or should those who are not poor be doing about it? Those are the two questions I want to address this morning.

There are several reasons why one might want to avoid talking about poverty. One is that talking about “the poor” means giving people a label, and that’s almost always a mistake, because it leads to treating people as objects, making their humanity invisible and thus increasing their poverty. Another is that there are so many party political flags in the ground that it’s quite a challenge to slalom through them to a genuinely theological understanding. And another is that poverty seems such an abiding aspect of human society that engaging it feels depressing, guilt-inducing and disempowering.

Despite these good reasons, people in churches and universities talk about poverty all the time. It’s taken for granted that major programming will have a dimension that addresses poverty, and the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership, PathWays at Duke, DukeEngage and a host of campus ministry and Congregation at Duke Chapel initiatives express this assumption. While most modern universities are ambivalent about religion in general and a little bewildered by Christianity in particular, the social outreach part of religion is something most higher education institutions can digest fairly easily. We could call it the acceptable secular face of God. But what is poverty? Why do people become and stay poor? And what can be done about it? These are questions we don’t so often ask.

Let’s start with the question “What is poverty?” I’ll introduce you to a woman from the two-thirds world called Maria. Why start with a woman? Well, women perform two-thirds of the world’s work, earn one-tenth of the world’s income, are two-thirds of the world’s illiterate, and own less than a hundredth of the world’s property. Maria lives in substandard housing with inadequate sanitation. She doesn’t have the regular means to feed herself, with little or no land, livestock or spare cash. She doesn’t get enough nutritious food to give her a lot of energy and help her fight off infections. She doesn’t live near places where goods are bought and sold, or places where capital or credit are available. What money she is able to save is likely to be blown away by obligatory cultural rites of passage. She lives in fear, because she’s so close to the edge that a natural disaster could force her to sell what few assets she has simply to secure short-term survival. She’s easy prey for the forces of exploitation, the moneylender, the protection racketeer, the merciless landlord, the bogus holy man, the drug dealer. Under pressure on all sides, her key domestic, extended family and community relationships become fragile, and she is isolated from trustworthy people on whom she can rely. Deprived of the trust that is at the heart of faith, it’s hard for her to hear or believe in the utter and endless love God has for her. This accumulation of circumstances leaves her powerless. It’s hard for her or anyone meeting her to identify what she’s done wrong, and it’s hard for her or anyone meeting her to identify exactly what a willing person could do to help. This is poverty.

Such a description of poverty shows how many of the issues cross over from the two-thirds world to the developed world. A person in Durham can share most of these experiences with Maria. While universal education is a massive opportunity, in many cases the other pressures of life that I’ve just been illustrating make it hard for a child in poverty to take advantage of that opportunity. And it’s worth noting that many of the characteristics of social isolation I’ve listed can confront those *with* money too. If your network of relationships becomes so fragile that you live in fear and can’t trust any of the key people in your life, your bank manager may still say you’re rich but your experience may be so damaged that poverty might seem a good word to describe it. In that sense, poverty really can come upon anybody.

The question of why people become and stay poor is a controversial one, to say the least. It’s a huge subject, but I’m going to suggest that there are three key metaphors that dominate a lot of thinking about it.

(1) The first is the metaphor of the desert. People are poor because they don't have enough. They don't have enough money, food, good relationships, skills, education. This isn't really anyone's fault. It's more about a problem of scarcity of resources or poor distribution. The solution is to give people more – in the short term more nutritious food and clean water, in the long term more education, more training in sustainable agriculture and healthy work and family patterns, more stable institutions, more access to credit and outlets for their skills. The desert metaphor motivates many non-poor to active involvement in relief and development, but it can lead to a quasi-colonial attitude that misses people's humanity. It can assume an us-and-them where "we" are defined by what we have and "they" are defined by what they lack.

(2) The second metaphor is favored by those who are disillusioned or angry about the naïveté of the desert metaphor. They see the problem as not about scarcity but about sin. This second metaphor is that of the prison. Poverty is a kind of incarceration. Many see poverty as a prison in which people are put by others. They see the poor as kept in poverty by a widening circle of exploiters: by the local non-poor who siphon off resources and benefits that were intended for the poor, by local authorities who use blackmail and violence to rob the poor, and by local employers and traders who use their strong bargaining position to force the poor to sell their goods and labor for way below market value. Others see poverty as a prison in which people put themselves, either by passive characteristics such as laziness or lack of ambition or by more active destructive tendencies such as reckless behavior or substance addiction. The prison metaphor motivates many social justice and evangelistic responses, but it can get caught up in social theory or theological paternalism that it can like the desert metaphor, miss people's specific humanity. It can overlook the extraordinary ingenuity required to live in poverty and demonstrated by those poor people who survive.

(3) The third metaphor sees poverty as disease. This regards poverty as a kind of sickness. Sickness is usually not something you're born with, but something you can quickly pick up from those around you. Sickness is a kind of compromise between the metaphors of desert and prison. To use this metaphor one must always remember that the sickness lies fundamentally in relationships, communities and societies rather than in individuals. I think despite the stigma of the word disease it's still potentially the most helpful metaphor of the three. Unlike the prison metaphor the language of disease isn't about blame, but unlike the desert language it takes the complexity of poverty seriously. Disease language helps us recall that poverty, in some of its dimensions, can afflict even the circumstantially rich. A disease is a condition with a non-human root cause and physical, mental, social and spiritual symptoms, which nonetheless requires a very human response in every dimension. Like any other disease, that response is sometimes aimed at identifying and facilitating a cure, and sometimes focused on continuing to care when a cure is not perceivable. Either way it's about balancing the general characteristics of the disease with its particular manifestation in each person and community, and realizing that physical change is only part of an ecology of relational, spiritual and communal dimensions of healing.

What does it mean for a university to address poverty? This is a pressing issue for many people in a place like Duke. It's a question for the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership, for many of Duke's departments, institutes and schools, such as Public Policy, Political Science, Divinity, the Community Service Center, the Council for Civic Engagement and many more. If one takes the first metaphor and sees poverty as desert, the tendency is to see Duke as a place with lots of resources and to assume that addressing poverty means simply transferring resources from one location to another. If and when poverty continues to exist, the logical explanation is that not enough resources have been transferred. This shows the inadequacy of the desert metaphor and the kind of thinking it leads to. Poverty is much more complex than simply one set of people having fewer resources than others. If one takes the second approach, and sees poverty as a prison in which the poor are put by the machinations of the non-poor, conscientious efforts to address poverty on the part of the non-poor will seem to be no more than sinister public relations exercises, claiming goodwill when all the while underwriting oppression. While such analysis may sometimes be healthy correction from a critical friend, it seems to me more often to perpetuate a self-fulfilling cynicism. However one may take the third approach, and see poverty as a disease by which some are afflicted but by which all are diminished. From the perspective of affliction, initiatives such as neighborhood partnerships are ways of getting all the stakeholders round the table to evaluate local wisdom, pressing problems, and wider resources, affirming and empowering local leadership, individual initiative, and shared responsibility. In other words, exactly what's required.

It seems to me the best way for a university to address poverty is by being a university. That is, on the one hand to be a greenhouse of ideas and research into what works and what doesn't, what causes and what cures, what curses and what heals; and meanwhile on the other hand to model what a genuinely healthy community might look like, what there is to live for once one has emerged or been helped out of poverty. Being a good neighbor is important, and it's always worth underlining that there's no story of Duke that's not about Durham and no story of Durham that's not about Duke. But the best things Duke can do in relation to poverty locally and internationally is to investigate and codify global examples of transformation and healing and to model what it means to be a healthy community. Being a healthy community means centrally attending to the quality of interaction between faculty, students and staff, but it also includes attending to the remuneration and working conditions of those staff whose work carries little or no social status.

And that brings us finally to the question of what it means for the Church to address poverty. "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." So said one of the early theologians of the Church. The Church is in the business of glorifying God by watching, accompanying, celebrating and participating in the way God brings people to become fully alive. That means people using their full capacities, it means people living in healthy relationships, it means people rejoicing in faith in God, and all of these things through good times and bad. Anything less is a kind of poverty, and it's a poverty that can apply to anybody.

The Church is called to be in such a relationship to the poor that the poor are no longer "other," and that poverty is no longer an abstract noun. Many of the poor are part of the Church, and all of the poor are close to God's heart. Being a Christian means restoring friendship with God, with one another, and with God's creation, and that has to include restoring friendship between the non-poor and those who are poor, or in some cases making overtures and adventures in friendship where no friendship has gone before. If we think of poverty as a kind of affliction, then the Church's efforts should be divided between helping the afflicted find healing and walking alongside them whether they find healing or not. And the testimony of the saints is that this is precisely where riches are to be found. Riches are to be found in walking with the poor, in sharing the joy of coming out of poverty and in making the discoveries and the friendships that bring surprises even amidst poverty. As the Chapel and Congregation have been discovering in the new friendships we have been making in Durham's West End and elsewhere, riches are not to be found in sealing oneself off from relationships that will demand, challenge or threaten one's affluence. That is simply to impose on oneself a different kind of poverty.

Riches are to be found in discovering our role as priests. We read today in Exodus that God called Israel to be a priestly kingdom. In Revelation we read that Jesus "loves us and freed us from our sins and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father." A priest is one who takes the gifts of the people and celebrates as God transforms the gifts of some into his blessings for all. A priest is one who takes the sins of the people and rejoices as God transforms the poverty of our nature by the riches of his grace. This is what it means to be fully alive and this is what it means to glorify God. Protestants can be a bit wary of the word "priest" because it sounds a bit Catholic and churchy. But those of you here today as alums, do you not look back on your life and say this is what I've been trying to do all along, to take the gifts I've been given and let God transform them into blessings for all; to take the problems I have found and ask God to turn them into his opportunities? And don't you look back and see the glory of God? And those of you with your careers ahead of you, isn't this what you long for your life to be about? This is the way in which we are all priests, a priestly kingdom. And this is our prayer for the poor, that they may discover and we may discover from them how to be priests, to turn resources for one into blessings for all, to turn adversity into an occasion for intimacy with God, to turn even sin into a discovery of the transforming grace of God.

It's often recalled that Jesus said "the poor will always be with you." But it's often forgotten that when Jesus said those words, he was poor. What do those words then mean? I suggest they mean, "You will always be with the poor." For that is where true riches lie.