

Introduction

I was recently reminded of an entry in my journal from late 1989 where I wrote that I believed that South Africa was about to explode in civil war because people seemed so angry and that I was wrestling with what my response would be, as I could see no other way. Within a few months things had changed dramatically - Nelson Mandela had been released, the ANC was operating as a legal political party and we were marching peacefully, optimistically towards the new South Africa.

I don't know about you, but I am really struggling with pessimism at the moment - blackouts, crime, inflation, interest rates and the recent xenophobic attacks to name but a few are all taking their toll and it gets a bit much. I am by nature an optimist, the cup is always half full for me but over the past year I have felt this optimism slipping - harder and harder to call forth. But recently God has been showing me how idolatrous my optimism is because it finds its strength in what I and my society can do rather than in Jesus. I have come to realise that God doesn't call us to optimism he calls us to HOPE and they are not the same thing and so God has been teaching me what it means to hope in Him rather than to simply be optimistic in the future.

It is in this context that I start a series on responding to poverty tonight, as someone rooting out the idolatry of optimism and pessimism and learning to find the hope of the world in Jesus. At the recent NIRSA conference called by Moss Nthla and Michael Cassidy the defining verse came from 2 Chronicles 12vs 20 -

Lord we are helpless and powerless, we do not know what to do BUT we look to you.... we are helpless and powerless, we do not know what to do BUT we look to you

Is 65 : 17 to 25 describes the new heaven and new earth and what it will look like, we pray may it be on earth as it is in heaven.

In it we hear that no longer will an infant only live a few days or will children be born to destruction but we live in a city that has some of the highest rates of asthma fatalities, TB, foetal alcohol syndrome and HIV in the world -

infants die and children are born to destruction we do not know what to do BUT we look to you Oh Lord.

In it we hear that people will enjoy the fruit of their labour, nor will they labour in vain but we live in a city where in many communities more than half the adult population have no means of earning an income and where those that do earn far less than they need to survive -

People labour in vain and we do not know what to do BUT we look to you Oh Lord

In it we hear that people will build houses and live in them but we live in a city where tens of thousands of people live without adequate housing or shelter.-

In a construction boom people are building houses but not living in them - we do not know what to do BUT we look to you Oh Lord.

We look to you Oh Lord, I want that to be the focus of the next few weeks - I don't have any grand plans to set before you just a deep belief that our salvation lies in Christ alone and we don't have enough resources or energy to replace him. We are arguably, in a collective sense, the richest church in this city and it would be very tempting to argue that we could make the difference but we can't - not in our strength.

Pray....

Lord, in Ezekiel you declare that we must beware the prophet that says "peace, peace when there is no peace" and we must watch for the prophet who says only his words and not yours. Please be with me tonight as I share that it would be obvious what are my words and what are yours and give us all soft hearts to hear your word.

Similarly father you tells us that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, in this topic it is very easy to feel condemned - give us the strength to resist Satan in this and allow your words to do what they need to do. AMEN

Who is my neighbour - law versus relationship

Over the past weeks I have been stimulated and challenged by the series on community and God's command to us to love each other before anything else. We have been encouraged to love, to serve, to speak well of, to deal with each other in humility and to seek unity amongst a number of other things. A picture of a loving community being the definitive mark of people following Jesus.

Perhaps an obvious question is where is the boundary for this? Who am I called to love?

- The people in my house church or connect group?
- The people in the service I attend?
- The people at Christ Church?
- More than this??????

I am overwhelmed by what it means to love just those in a small circle of friends - it seems hard enough to love those I know never mind those in the 8am service as well.

Jesus was asked the same question in our very familiar reading tonight - who do I need to love and he answers the question with the story of the good samaritan. It is such a well known story that I think that the implication of the story has lost some of its power. I'm struggling with how do I find the time, energy and resources to love Liesl and my children and my closest friends and I come to Jesus hoping for a comforting answer and he answers with this story that has a couple of implications for me that are frankly a little terrifying.

The first implication is that those who are in need are my neighbours, they're in my community - they're in the circle I'm called to love. It is not us helping them it is us helping each other. Those in need are not "the poor" they are our neighbours, our family and our friends - they should not be nameless.

Secondly our neighbours are not only those who share my culture and values. Jesus chooses to use a Samaritan to explain who my neighbour is. Any illusion his listeners could have held that the command to love was those on my doorstep is blown out of the water by this.

Stop and think about the implications for a moment because I think it is important that we recognise how overwhelming this is - everything we've spoken of over the past few weeks counts for everyone - not just an inner circle - what emotions emerge as you think about that?

PAUSE

The old testament law had significant provision for protecting the poor and the vulnerable in society. If you read Leviticus 19 for example there are a number of laws protecting and caring for the most vulnerable members of society, similarly the Jubilee law could have been very effective at preventing the ever increasing inequality in society from generation to generation. But the law wasn't very good in achieving God's plans - but what the law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did through Christ. So Christ fulfils the law by taking it much further than a duty and making a response to poverty rooted in relationship first.

We have changed laws in our country and implemented new laws in an effort to deal with the systemic poverty caused by generations of systemic injustice which directly contradict the law of God. But the law isn't very good in achieving God's plans - but what the law can not do, weak as it is through the flesh, God does through Christ. Jesus calls us to fulfil the law by taking it much further than charity or obeying a law but by calling us to relationship, to love, ... to community. This is the profoundly transformative command of the story of the good samaritan.

In our reflections on our own community we need to recognise the ways in which our community is deeply broken because we lack the poor amongst us in any significant sense. We lack their voice, their faith, their resilience and most deeply we lack their friendship. Because of our history the poor are not our geographic neighbours making it harder to be their neighbours in the way Christ calls us to.

EVERYTHING changes when this happens. Befriending those who are poor rather than simply serving them transforms our world, we can't look at anything the same again. It was friendship with George Ngamlana when I was entering my twenties that transformed what I thought of apartheid and being conscripted, it is friendship with Recky Pato that is still transforming how I understand poverty in this city today. My friend Sharlene has had her life changed by the deep friendships she developed with the young people who helped her with her thesis.

What the law is unable to do, God does in Christ - before we can respond to poverty we must know we are not obeying the law we are loving our friends!!!

Fear is the greatest threat

But this doesn't come easily. The gods of our age resist this at every turn. Building community takes time and energy and doing so across economic and cultural divides even more so and our society is chronically busy and exhausted. But I believe there is a more pervasive feature of South African society that resists this move at every turn.

Alan Paton in Cry the beloved country writes :

"I know that one day we will be free from the fear of bondage but when we will be free from the bondage of fear I cannot tell" - the fear of bondage was destroyed in 1994 but the bondage of fear is perhaps stronger than ever and it is this fear that stands firmly in the way of responding to poverty by building relationship.

Paul in 2 Corinthians 10 writes that the weapons God gives us are divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses, speculations and everything lofty thing that raises itself up against the knowledge of God.

I do not deny that fear is very powerful and that it is rooted in very real situations but I also know that fear is incredibly deceptive and that in our society it is a deeply rooted fortress that has raised itself up against the knowledge of God. It expresses itself in many ways but let me briefly highlight two areas I have had to wrestle with.

The fear of physical safety - we all struggle with this and the media and our conversations just keep feeding it. One consequence of this is the apparent logical progression that since we think that most crime is committed by poor people (which is debatable anyway) therefore all poor people must be criminals and poor communities must be tremendously dangerous. Whilst this sounds wrong when spoken out loud it is a dominant thought pattern amongst us and it is a lie from the pit of hell. One of the pieces of advice I often give foreign interns at the warehouse is to be very wary of advice from rich people about the reality of life in poor communities in Cape Town. I am embarrassed by the number of times I've had well meaning members of Christ Church get into a conversation with an intern or volunteer give them stern warnings about all the rapists, murderers and thieves in the community they're working only for the intern to hear that this person has never actually visited the community they're talking about.

It isn't just us, all our communities live with this to some extent, which doesn't make it any less deceptive. I must tell you one story though, we had an volunteer from Duke University in the USA spend a few months with us a couple of years ago. As part of his time Hudson asked if he could spend time living in a township and so we found accommodation for him in Khayelitsha. He was working in Manenberg

primarily and so one morning as he was having breakfast with the young men he was staying with he mentioned he was spending the day in Manenberg at which point the young men tried to explain to him how dangerous Manenberg was and that he shouldn't go there. Later in the day while walking around Manenberg someone asked where he was staying and he answered Khayelitsha. So once again he was told that this was too dangerous and that he shouldn't spend time there. Finally that evening he attended a gathering in Kenilworth and had to explain that he was living in Khayelitsha and working in Manenberg....well you can imagine what people had to say.

The second fear I have had to confront is the fear of being overwhelmed, that I don't have enough to offer one person never mind entire communities. It is a fear that I am currently wrestling with very deeply and I spent a morning weeping with a friend in the warehouse prayer room recently as I saw how terrified I was of all these people who were beginning to work alongside us and, in my mind, rely on me for their salvation. I am going to come back to this idea in the third sermon but for now I want to mention it and say that it is another fear rooted in deception because ultimately I am not their salvation Jesus is, and I can only do what Jesus tells me to do.

When the disciples saw 5000 hungry men, they were overwhelmed and tried to make a plan to send people to the nearby towns because they didn't have the resources to respond. But once they listened to Jesus they got to see the miracle. Confronting this fear is fun because the truth is we don't have enough but as we let God be God we see miracles and we all love a good miracle - but more of that in the 3rd sermon.

If we are to respond to poverty through relationship then we must confront these fears. We are told that perfect love casts out all fear, this is the divinely powerful weapon that will destroy this fortress - as we chose to love so the fear is driven out - I think the language of driven out is helpful, it doesn't just disappear in an instant it is driven out by love.

“Disciplines” to nurture this life

So how do we go about doing this - it is my fulltime job and I find it hard enough, what about those of us whose lives just don't connect with poor people on a day to day basis. I've heard Duncan say that liturgy is a wonderful servant and a horrible master so as part of each sermon in this series I want to reflect on “liturgies” or practices that can help us in the particular area I'm addressing.

A friend of mine in Khayelitsha has told me that we can't do reconciliation in this country because we we have never been conciled so what we need is relationship building. We're a broken community and so we need “disciplines” or “liturgy” that will enable us to become whole - to help us build relationships.

It is similar to being injured while playing sport and then stretching to recover. I am still trying to pretend I am a touch rugby player as I meander towards my 40th birthday. In the past season I have hurt a couple of muscles and have had to do some corrective exercises and stretches to get them back to functioning properly again. I have disciplines I need to practice to be able to play like I would like too - liturgy and disciplines

We need to recognise that we live in a society that has been deeply wounded in the relational area and so we need to take specific action to address this otherwise we will never recover.

The actions aren't deep and strange but they do require deliberate choices on our part - here are some suggestions.

What if we all joined a sports club that was part of a poor community - a running club for example or some other social club that may exist in some form in the a poor community. Doing what you normally do but making the choice to invest in being part of a poor community rather than your own community.

How about choosing a different church - perhaps attending somewhere else in the mornings or actually leaving Christ Church...putting a new spin on what we mean by Christ Church scattered :) A bold suggestion to make when you're preaching in a church but I think for some of us this could be right.

Connect with someone at work and allow them to tell you their story, find someone your age that you connect with and learn about their lives - give time. In these communities you tell someone you value them by giving your time. Ask someone to take you to a meal in their community, attend a funeral or a wedding and stay for the whole thing.

Invite someone to stay in your house for a time at little or very low cost and let them teach you about their lives, a student perhaps. If you're students living in a digs find a friend who can't afford it and make it possible for them to live with you but make sure they introduce you to their lives - you are not saving them, you are neighbours.

What about seeking to employ people with potential from poor communities. Affirmative action is a law which we should be fulfilling - not because it is a law but because we believe our communities need everyone in them, not just the wealthy.

One that is a burden for me is the schools we are choosing to attend - we are increasingly isolating our children more and more, often out of fear of something in the future. I know this is a challenging option but I think we really need to wrestle with the implication of all the wealthy people in this city pulling their children out of schools.

Those are just a couple of options but let me encourage you to be bold - to find places and moments where you can interact with poor people who aren't your servants, or your cause but your friends. If each person at Christ Church was deeply engaged with a friend or two who were poor we would be a very different community - we would spend our money differently, use our time and resources differently and our lives would be different.

Conclusion

In the movie Cry Freedom Steven Biko is asked by another character about the risks he is taking and he answers that the difference between them is that he, Steven biko, knows that he is in a war and that in a war we do things that would seem unusual in a time of peace.

Well Scripture tells us over and over again that we are in a battle and the battle against poverty will be one of the defining battles of this time. We're in a war and its not against flesh and blood - its against the principalities and powers of this world who would seek to dominate and destroy, would seek to have us believe that the crumbs off our tables are a sufficient response to poverty.

But we know the crumbs, or even a share of our meal are not enough. We've been given weapons that are not of this world but they are powerful enough to destroy this fortress. Do we dare to believe that somehow its possible that the answer to our countries woes lie in our obedience and God's movement of grace. Do we dare to believe that things can change, that our society can be different that the church can show that it knows the answer to this generation's most profound questions.

The challenges we are facing are immense, they are too big for us - we are hopeless and do not know what to do and so we have to look to the Lord. But it doesn't end there, in the story of Jehosophat God tells the Israelites that he will save them but that they need to go and take up their positions against the enemy and then they will see the salvation of their God - they need to be prepared to risk everything and then God shows up.

The first position God has called us too is to love our neighbour as we love ourselves - to face up to this impossible task in obedience. What would we see as we took up our positions as neighbours to those who are poor, if we were willing to place ourselves there, to confront our fears and our hopelessness and too trust that we would then see the Lord's salvation.

We've tried lots of other things, I think its worth giving this a try!