

Responding to Poverty : 2 of 4 : Christ Church, Kenilworth

SEEING AND HEARING - Sermon Notes (largely written up from skeleton notes that were preached from)

Exodus 3: 1 - 14

25 May 2008

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## **INTRODUCTION**

I was hoping to have some fancy pictures and powerpoint slides for you tonight, filled with provocative images to challenge, amuse and compel but then this weekend happened and now all I have is words and my weakness. I suppose I could say with Paul that I didn't come with powerpoint slides and clever words just my weakness and tiredness.

Within 10 kilometres of where we are sitting, there are over 3000 people being housed in temporary accommodation having run from their homes. Last week I briefly spoke about hope and this weekend that was initially hard to find but as always its there.

I've found it in a group of teenagers coming to work at the warehouse last night and being happy to scrub toilets

I've found it in the tremendous response of the township church community providing refuge and protection at great cost to themselves.

I've found it in numerous church halls and homes where people have mobilised to care for 1000s of people 1 person at a time.

Hope is there but it has to be found and can't be found in front of the TV.

Last week I also spoke of relationships being built with people who are poor. We have a huge opportunity here to build relationships as we respond to this crisis.

I have wrestled with the extent to which I change my plans for this sermon given the context we are in at this present moment - last night the suggestion was made that we simply can the sermon and give people a chance to do something. But in the end I felt God's prompting to preach what I was going to preach but to allow the lens of current events to challenge us to apply it more immediately.

## EYES TO SEE AND EARS TO HEAR

Tonight's reading is from a significant moment in biblical history. It is the moment that God introduces Himself to Moses. We are mostly familiar with the story. The Israelites had ended up in Egypt because of Moses. They had flourished but the new pharaoh had made them slaves. Moses had been part of the royal family, had seen the slavery, killed an Egyptian and then fled to the desert to work. It is here that God meets him and introduces himself.

He starts by telling Moses that "I am the God of your fathers" and then goes on to explain three other things that had led God to come to Moses...

- I have seen the oppression of my people
- I have heard their cries
- I am aware of their suffering

I noticed this verse a while ago and have been wrestling with its implications ever since. The rest of the story is well known as God tells Moses how he is going to save his people but it starts with God declaring, at this pivotal moment in scripture, that has seen, heard and knows about the oppression of His people and it is this that is moving Him.

If you scan through the rest of scripture, particularly old testament this idea reoccurs over and over again. In Judges God keeps seeing or hearing the cries of his people and calling someone to lead them out of their suffering. Look at each time he calls a Judge the introduction often includes some reference to seeing or hearing about suffering. It seems His mercies never end it - His people keep causing themselves to suffer and every-time they end up calling to God He responds as he hears their cries.

As we respond to poverty we need to be like God - our response must start from a place of seeing, hearing and knowing about poverty. It has to start with our hearts breaking over the cries and oppression of people.

There is an interesting comment on this in Jesus' teaching. In Matthew Chap 6 as part of the sermon on the mount, after talking about giving to the poor, prayer, fasting and wealth Jesus starts talking about not having a bad eye.

What is this about? I grew up thinking that having a bad eye somehow related to looking at an attractive lady friend for too long. But I've recently discovered that having a bad eye is actually a Jewish metaphor for ignoring the poor, that to this day you can still find beggars in Israel saying that you shouldn't have a bad eye as you walk past them. So Jesus emphasises this point of seeing the poor.

Jeremiah is one of the many places in scripture where people who have eyes but don't see are mentioned. This is a recurring theme in scripture and it is often expressed in prayer to God that He would give people eyes to see and ears to hear. So it is very easy and common place for people to have eyes and ears but not to see or hear. In relation to poverty I think this is a particular need in South Africa because it is so common place that it can simply become background noise.

Illustration of Eliza telling me a long story.

Some points about seeing and hearing that I've learnt in the last few years.

1. We need to consciously choose to see and hear poverty, to choose to hear the cry because in this we imitate God. We need to see the people behind the poverty. Even for someone like me that spends a lot of my time in these contexts I still need to make conscious choices on a weekly basis to practice the art of seeing and hearing.

This requires us to get out of our comfort zones because in our day to day lives we're not generally exposed to poverty.

2. We need to see past our needs and our perception of people's needs because in this we imitate Christ. Jesus, as our Saviour, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but just to dwell amongst us. We do not experience anything that He has not experienced. We are able to relate to Jesus because he knows us.

As we respond to poverty this is a need for us. We need to come to understand the real needs of people and to recognise that we perceive needs through our rich lens.

Habitat for humanity build and hot water cylinder example of this.

The area of needs assessment is a complex thing that could be a series of sermons all on its own and we don't have the time for it now. But I do want to emphasise that understanding that addressing real needs requires careful thought and deliberate choice

3. Finally we need to see signs of the kingdom wherever we are. Jesus spoke about only doing what he saw the father doing. As we enter poor communities we need to realise to realise that we don't bring God into these communities - He

is already there and it is vital that we look for signs of what He is doing and involve ourselves in that.

Rhonda Hudson example of seeing clothes that have been washed as an indicator that in the midst of extreme poverty people are getting up and choosing to wash their clothes - they haven't given up.

## **GUILT AND COMPARISON**

As with last week I want to briefly highlight two things that will get in the way of us seeing and hearing.

Firstly feeling guilty about our wealth. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. It doesn't help us to feel guilty, where God convicts us we need to respond with repentance but guilt leaves us paralysed. We can balance this with thankfulness for what we have - not in comparison to others but simply for what we have. If we give thanks because we have more then we face the problem of what do we do with those that are wealthier than us.

Secondly we need to recognise that our context gives us a lens. We, in this church, are in a very rich context and this can affect us. I often feel poor here and I am amongst the richest 6% of the people in the city. Because of this we can spend our time worrying about what we don't have rather than what we do have. We need to lose the lens because it blinds us to other needs.

## **LITURGY**

So how can we nurture the habit of seeing and hearing the poor. Here are some ideas:

- Know the truth - what are the poverty statistics about where you live. Use the Tony Campolo example of offence caused by swearing rather than statistics.
- Pray for eyes to see and ears to hear - allow God to break your heart. Don't run away from the things that really hurt - feed it, find out more. Allow it to break your heart over and over again. Bill Hybel's Holy Discontent.
- Expose yourself to the reality, visit, travel and listen to people. Go and see. Find people you know that work in these areas and spend the time with them.

## **CONCLUSION**

I think it is interesting that when God sees and hears he chooses someone to react - he doesn't just make it right. He finds people who are seeing and hearing the same thing and works with them to bring salvation.

In closing I want to reflect on a devastating verse in Ez 16.49. It describes that the sin of sodom was that they lived lives of careless ease, were arrogant overfed and ignored the needs of the poor. This was the sin that led to sodom's destruction.

Is say this carefully but we need to hear this verse. We so often lead lives of careless ease, we are arrogant overfed and ignore the poor and needy. We are in danger of being Sodom.

Sometimes it is hard to imagine how we can do anything about the big giants : Unemployment, AIDS, Poverty, Violence, Crime and many other things. These are big things and as individuals it is hard to dream about seriously impacting these things.

But one thing we can do, even this week - we can put aside our careless ease, we can notice the poor and needy amongst us.

Let us aim to banish sodomy, in this sense of the word, from our midst.

Thank you