

Evidence to convict?

One of the practices of which the Church of Scotland should be rather less than proud, and which thankfully has now long gone, concerns the rental of church pews – something which I gather was also common in the Netherlands, including this very church. What it involved was the renting of church pews by families who could afford to do it and of course, not surprisingly, the best pews in the best locations went to the wealthiest people, while the poorest people sat on benches or on stools at the back or else stood. So it was that your pew and its position was a way of advertising your wealth and status in the community. So, for example, we read that at Warrington in England, in 1631, one Thomas Ireland set up a pew “in the manner of a scaffold 12 feet high on pillars of wood overlooking the pulpit and congregation”. That must have been quite a sight and it certainly suggests that Mr Ireland was blessed with no great gift of humility. And we read too of a Mrs Crawshay from a church in Wales who sat with her dogs and had tea served on a table in her pew during services. Well, clearly, Mr Ireland and Mrs Crawshaw were respectable and wealthy pillars of society and they illustrate so graphically how the seating arrangements of the church represented the social hierarchy of the community.

What brought this to mind was verse 3 in our reading from James chapter 2: ‘For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please’, while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there’ or ‘sit at my feet’, have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?’ And I couldn’t help wondering what James would have had to say about pew renting; what he would have had to say to Mr Ireland and Mrs Crawshay and the whole rotten system that they exemplified? Indeed I wonder what he might have had to say about that prominent Burgomaster pew that stands over there, reserved for all the city worthies and facing directly where the pulpit used to be on that wall, giving it an exalted and privileged position.

The question of course is, how did the church ever come to all this? Did no-one ever read the Letter of James? As I mentioned last week, James had a hard time getting into the Bible at all, and I can’t help wondering if James had been a bit more prominent, if he’d written a bit more –let’s say, if we heard as

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much from James as we do from Paul in the New Testament - perhaps the story of the church would have been very different.

And what is particularly disturbing is what James says here and elsewhere about the rich. Indeed you could say that he comes across as positively Marxist in some of his rhetoric. Take verse 5 of our reading: 'Has not God chosen the poor in world to be rich in faith...?' Is this not what some theologians call 'God's preferential option for the poor', God's special prioritising of the oppressed? Indeed James seems to be construing the faith in terms of class conflict – the rich are the oppressors and the poor the victims. As he goes on in verse 6, 'Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?' And we wonder what James is referring to there. What is that all about? Well, it's likely that James was written in a time of persecution, addressing Christians who were facing the threat of arrest and execution. And James may be drawing his readers' attention to the fact that the rich and powerful to whom they are showing deference may be the very same people who are arresting and trying them. It's like the burgomasters sitting over there in that pew and listening to what gets said here just in case it's something they don't like. But there's more. I wonder if you're familiar with these words and can tell me who said them: 'come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire...' That's strong stuff, and who said it? Trotsky? Lenin? Jeremy Corbyn (if you know who that is)? No. James said it. He says it in chapter 5 of this letter. He says that our riches will be evidence against us – presumably at the Day of Judgement. No wonder we're more inclined to read Paul than James!

But of course James is just drawing on a long tradition in the Bible that testifies to God's passion for the poor and his anger at the injustices that make people poor. We heard it in our reading from Proverbs this morning: 'do not rob the poor... or crush the afflicted... for the Lord pleads their cause.' We hear it in Jesus' own ministry: 'blessed are the poor!' he says, and 'woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.' But somewhere along the line this note seems to have been soft-pedalled. This cutting edge seems to have been blunted.

I was fascinated in preparing this sermon to read something about attitudes to the poor in Christian history and the way in which we have diluted

the Biblical teaching¹. Evidently during the Middle Ages, Christians believed that the poor symbolized Christ. Born at the bottom of the ranks of society, the poor depended totally on the mercy of God and Christians for their survival. By assisting beggars, therefore, richer Christians honoured Christ. During the 16th century period of the Reformation, however, late medieval Europe experienced rapid urbanization – the rise of cities. But then – and this is where it all begins to sound depressingly familiar – constant war and famine and plague uprooted and displaced people and they migrated to the cities, seeking housing and food and medicine, and employment (what’s that about history repeating itself?). So the streets became flooded with "beggars." And that led to a change of attitude. The Church began to distinguish the ‘worthy’ poor from ‘unworthy’ poor. The churches were willing to help upper-class wealthy people who in social upheaval had lost their income but who were too ashamed to beg – they were worthy. But those who for whatever reason kept on begging were considered to be too lazy and unworthy to receive charity. And so people no longer saw the image of Christ in the face of the beggar but instead feared them as carriers of diseases and of moral decay. Cities banned begging, and cleaned up their streets by expelling beggars. In other words, they found the reasons to turn the poor away.

So to today and what a Sunday to be exploring these themes. How appropriate, when our world has been horrified by these terrible images of traumatised refugees in flight, and as many perish and the limp body of that little boy is washed up on a beach. And we simply do not know what to do, though of course we can always find reasons for what we can’t or won’t do, reasons to turn them away. And what is so difficult for us is that most of us here today, considered in global terms, are privileged and wealthy, and even in relative terms most of us are well off. And how, then, are we to respond to James and his fierce words? How are we, the relatively wealthy, to live out God’s bias to the poor? It is so hard, after all, for us to renounce our wealth and to disinvest and to really stand with the poor. And we look at these distressing images that have assailed us these past days and we feel so helpless. What can we do?

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Prophets 17-Reign of Christ).

Well, here's a suggestion. I mentioned earlier that the Christians James was writing to may have been enduring persecution. And I remember some years ago a challenge that used to be put to Christians. The challenge was, 'if you were to be arrested today for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?' It's an interesting question. Well, I would suggest, with James' teaching in mind, that we relatively affluent Christians might adopt a refinement of that challenge. Given that God's concern for the poor lies at the very heart of our faith, given God's bias, if you were to be arrested today for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence of your commitment to the poor to convict you? And what would the evidence be?

That's a question we might put first to this church as a whole, to this English Reformed Church. Would there be enough evidence to convict this church as a whole of commitment to the poor? And it's not the only thing, but I'm proud that we could at least point to our support for the Mulanje Mission Hospital in Malawi, the sixth poorest nation in the world. And today, as on all Communion Sundays, we will take up a retiring collection for that hospital to which you are invited to contribute, and later in the year we will be hosting a concert here to raise funds for the hospital. And I'm glad of that evidence to convict the English Reformed Church of bearing witness to God's passion for the poor.

And what about us as individuals? No, we can't change the world. We can't make the Syrian refugee tragedy go away. But every euro given for the dispossessed, every cent given to a beggar, every act of solidarity and compassion is evidence against us. Mere faith by itself will not convict us – there must be hard, practical evidence, so what's it going to be?

Listen. God has chosen the poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to possess the kingdom. There are implications for us. The situation is urgent. Just imagine, the police hammering at the door, the police interrogating us for evidence. Will there be enough evidence to convict you? For myself, I am going to press hard for a conviction. And according to the Bible my conviction will actually help to acquit me at that greater Judgement on the last day. Amen.