

## Food Poverty in the Light of the Gospel

a reflection by Fr Michael Dunne,  
at the Caritas meeting, the Upper Library, Archbishop's House, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2014.

Food poverty in the light of the Gospel is of course the way we Christians who love the Gospel would look at the evil of food poverty. But we can usefully invert the title and look at things more critically as the wider world certainly does, namely: the Gospel in the light of food poverty. Is it a dead document or does it objectively inspire action in the face of an evil? My shocking language of a 'dead Gospel' is an allusion to a seminal document of Catholic social teaching, the Letter of St James the Apostle, in the New Testament:

"If a brother or a sister is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on and one of you says to them, 'I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty' without giving them these bare necessities of life, what good is that? It is the same with the faith: if good deeds do not go with it, it is quite dead!" (Jas 2:15).

So St James the Apostle, this intimate friend of Jesus Christ, says that without action addressing specifically food poverty, faith is not 'impaired' or 'undermined'; it is actually dead, dead in the water. Those who are not the Church's friends are right to judge us according to our action. And we as Christians are impelled by that scripture. But why is St James so emphatic? Because the Bible is full of food, food with a purpose. In the paradigm of Eden, it was as early as the third day when God created 'every kind of vegetation and fruit trees, enticing to look at and good to eat, and saw that it was *good*.' (cf Gn.1:12) There are numerous other references too to the goodness of food. Part of the Covenant between God and humanity which creation *is*, is the abundance and beauty of food. The Psalms sing of God's plenty: "God provides food for all living creatures, *because* His faithful love endures for ever." (Ps 136)

This is the point, really. God's giving us the goodness and the abundance of the world's food, is integral to His covenant with us. By making creation beautiful and fruitful, He proves His intentions are *good* in creating us, part of which is that in His love He carefully sustains and nourishes us through the goodness and abundance of food. If there are issues, therefore, of food poverty, and there always have been, then not only is God's good Name brought into question by those who, in their need, lack what He has given, but still more importantly, more objectively, where there is poverty His will is not being done. Part of His covenant is being undermined by the very people to whom He has entrusted the goodness of creation. This is a wound in the heart of God *because* it is a wound in human society. And so, from the beginning, God has spoken: Even before the Chosen People had made it from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land, whilst still in the desert where God had provided *food* in the midst of food poverty, God gives Moses a rule for when they settle in the Promised Land: "when you gather the harvest of your land, you are not to harvest to the very end of the field. You are neither to strip your vine bare nor to collect the fruit that has

fallen in your vineyard. You must leave them for the poor and for the stranger. I am the Lord your God.” (Lev 19:9-10)

Who were the poor and the stranger 3,250 years ago? They were the trafficked; the runaways; the migrants; the desperate; the marginalised; the broken; just as today they come to the Church’s doors.

So when the messianic days of the Lord come, when Christ came among us, God’s rushing to heal the wound, among others, of food poverty becomes more explicit and insistent. “Happy are the hungry now, you *shall have* your fill,” (Lk 6:20) Jesus says in His manifesto, the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, adding, “Alas, for you who have your fill now; you shall go hungry” (Lk 6:24). Those here who have their fill now will go hungry because they are not doing as they should which is to ensure that God’s will of plenty for all is being done. Jesus’ miracles of loaves and fish also teach us how He sees forms of food poverty: rather than let vast congregations faint as they go home, He transforms five loaves and two fish into a meal for more than 5,000 (Mt.14:13ff) and again, in a second transformation, a meal for more than 4,000 (Mt.15:32) with baskets left over.

Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* says that “the poor are the privileged recipients of the Gospel.” (EG 48) It is such a classic phrase of Francis, but when I looked it up a second time I found it was, in fact, Francis quoting Pope Benedict. But why are the poor the privileged recipients of the Gospel? It’s back to the covenant with humanity: it’s God’s will that all should enjoy the abundance of creation, so any form of poverty needs healing: poverty is an affront to God and to humanity; it is a wound for all. The more we lack, the greater our claim upon the Gospel; the more the Gospel and those who live by it, should wish to supply the lack, satisfy the need, do God’s will for all. The poor are the privileged recipients of the Gospel.

To meet and heal our shared poverty, Christ manifests God’s solidarity with the poor by being born Himself into poverty, and follows this by actually making Himself into our food: “my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink” (Jn 6:55). This raises us up to the divine life. Catholic social teaching’s first premise is that all people are made in the image and likeness of God, and have an eternal destiny, especially since, with the messianic age, Christ is one with us irrevocably and is encountered in each of us. “For when I was hungry you gave me food” He says on Judgement Day to the bewildered virtuous about to inherit eternal life for “insofar as you did this to the least of these, you did it to me” (Mt.25:35,40). This is what Bl. Mother Teresa of Calcutta calls the ‘five-finger Gospel’: ‘you did it to me’. Five words which sum up the Gospel in its entirety. The Gospel is thus a living document, breathing the Spirit of God; it impels us who love it to put it into practice, whilst it shows the world that this is what we are about *because* of the Gospel and we can be its witnesses. It is about the fullness of God’s love lived among those who love God, seeking to do His will for us all.

I was there with Cardinal Vincent in St Peter’s Basilica last Sunday for the canonisation of Pope St John Paul II, who had such a gift for dramatic phrases. One such phrase is: “it is through *your* love that God hopes to realise *His* divine

love. The future of the world and of the Church is at stake!" As part of his ministry in our Diocese, Cardinal Vincent has founded this organisation called Caritas, to manifest the love that Christ through St John Paul is asking us to live. He asks this not just because it does us good, nor even because in the light of the Gospel we can see that it is God's will that the wound of food poverty be healed, but because if we do not love, the future of the world and of the Church is at stake.