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The Ghettoising Effect of Poverty
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Thank you for the gracious invitation to share time, thoughts and ideas with you – it is a gift. To set and settle ourselves into the space, I wonder if we could start with a brief reflection, or meditation, if you will.

Call to mind someone you love. Close your eyes and imagine: the shape of her eyes, the curve of his smile, the sound of their laughter ...

Call to mind ... the way he smells, the way she feels – and the look they give you that says ‘I’ve had just about enough’ ...

If you can hold that face, that feeling, that love, then consider this:
One hundred trillion cells, seven million years of evolution, forty weeks of gestation, years of love and lessons and laughter – tears too no doubt – have gone into that person you brought to mind who holds your heart – what a wonder. Think on it.

And now, consider this:
Our planet home holds over 8 billion souls – every single one a unique one-off- never-to-be-repeated-ever creation: the creative imagination of the divine is reflected in every face. The Spirit of God is in every first and last and in-between breath. We are over eight billion – and behind every number is somebody’s name/for every statistic, there is a story and a dream and a purpose.

So, what if when someone asked us where we were from, our first thought wasn’t Edinburgh or Glasgow, South Carolina or Scotland, but what emerged unbidden was ‘I’m a citizen of the planet earth, part of a global neighbourhood, intricately inter-related – indivisible...

The God who connects us, calls us to remember that our futures are bound up in each other’s- that we are one family – as vast as the ocean, as intimate as a face, a smell, a touch, a look, a feeling ... we are called never to underestimate the deep desire with which God created this vision: it has never been more important for the world to remember that *no one* is an only child. We are called to share this big, wide, beautiful – fragile, limited resource with each other – and to return it to a future yet to be. And we can only do that together.

Ubuntu – ‘I am because you/we are.’

Waldensians/from a place of isolation and disenfranchisement ... framed their mission, made it very social-justice oriented ... Mediterranean Hope ...

What I would like to focus on in our limited time is theological/biblical reflection ... There are times when I believe, one interpretation has dominated, embedded itself into our collective psyche – and can be an unhelpful to those it should/could be liberating. Sometimes our own ‘Sunday school party line’ lets us down ... Two texts, but I encourage us to always bring our questions to the texts – they call us too!

Mark 14:7 **‘For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish, but you will not always have me.** The word poor can be translated ‘NEED’ ... not systemic, structured poverty.

*³ While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper,^[b] as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. ⁴ But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? ⁵ For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. ⁶ But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. ⁷ **For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish, but you will not always have me.** ⁸ She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. ⁹ Truly I tell you, wherever the good news^[c] is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”*

- The poor you will always have with you – no, not ‘the poor’, but ‘need’ you will always have with you. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land." Emergencies/crises will always happen ... so be generous when people are in need. But not an excuse for systemic/structured poverty ... Political decisions that reaffirm or introduce policies that oppress the most vulnerable. In the UK, zero hours contracts (often clothed in a veil of flexibility for the employee, mean in reality an eroding of their rights, a ‘pay as you go’ employment system) No fixed income: With no set hours, how much you earn will vary each week.
- Missing out on benefits: Working a zero-hour contract means you'll miss out on benefits that full time or permanent employees get as standard, like a pension and redundancy rights. There is also no recourse for unfair dismissal.

Poverty premiums – cost more for electricity and heating meters ... inadequate housing costs more to keep safe, watertight and warm.
Rural poverty - remote often equals more expensive (petrol/lack of infrastructure makes travel for healthcare, work, even aid)

Rhetoric dehumanises poor people – ‘swarms of refugees’/ ‘stop the small boats’, ignoring or glossing over the people in them. ‘strivers not skiivers’

Globally – climate change and our reluctance to be accountable ... loss and damage fund – finally agreed, but it is an empty bucket. Just transition to zero emissions, (veiled in ensuring oil industry workers aren’t left behind) but ask someone in Mozambique or Kiribati what a Just Transition looks like.

Guaranteed minimum income is being explored in Scotland.

Theology – use the story of the talent in the ground ... do not accept and invest in the systems.

The story of the talents, found in Matthew and Luke, has long been interpreted as a call to invest shrewdly, to use your talents, not waste them ...

For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, [1] to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' 21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' 22 And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' 23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' 24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' 26 But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return, I would have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29 For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

I don't know about you, but I immediately pull on the dress of the Protestant work ethic and sit in judgement against the lazy slave who can't be bothered to invest, to wheel and deal and make a profit with the master's gift. It's an obvious, if uneasy, connection. But what if our entry point is a false start? What if what we assume to be common sense is cultural bias?

The original hearers of this story would have heard a different story and their take on "the master" might have taken them in an entirely different direction.

The peasant-followers of Jesus lived in an Israel occupied by Rome, where the power and money was held by a very few, and the rest struggled under that oppressive regime. As citizens of that conquered country, they understood that there were at least two different world views wrestling with each other - two ways the world worked. In ancient Israel, if you were one of the lucky few who was "comfortable" and wanted to stay that way, then you compromised. And if you were a person who held any kind of power, well you realised it was precarious and "one hand washed the other." Even their religious leaders were in on it or they were out! And against this backdrop, Jesus tells this story of a master with three slaves and he gives them money and power and they decide what they'll do with it.

According to the law of Moses, it was wrong to charge interest, and according to the tradition, when the twelve tribes entered the Promised Land, part of the promise was that every family would receive and hold a share of that land - FOREVER. And to ensure that

there was equity and security for the vulnerable, all lands were returned and any debt was forgiven in the 7th year - the year of Jubilee! So, if you'd gotten rich, chances are you'd gotten there by breaking those long-established laws. And if we're in any doubt, well the story makes it clear in verses 26 and 27:

the master says 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. You ought to have played the game, done some deals - one hand washes the other - you know how this is supposed to work!'

But it was against the law of Moses to invest with the bankers and get interest - it was corrupt to hold onto land that wasn't yours/ and the "lazy" slave, silly man, obeyed the law, challenged the system. Many scholars see this story alongside other examples of passive resistance – like walking the extra mile (a Roman soldier was allowed to make a Jew carry his pack for a mile – the Romans were very methodical and had mile markers on the road - to go the extra mile was to put him in the position of breaking the law. - that forces the soldier to see that they are using their authority over you and not treating you as an equal, that alerts the officer that they are treating you as a lessor, that allows them to see that they are abusing their power over you and to consider changing their behaviour. Turning the other cheek, "When someone strikes you on your right cheek, offer your left" he said. Masters reprimanded their slaves by slapping them with the back of their right hand/ hitting them on their right cheek. (Show them) It looks and feels dismissive ... But to strike a peer, to hit your equal, you would use your fist and hit directly, usually to the left cheek. [This all assumes that the person hitting is right-handed.] But Jesus says - turn the other cheek.

- that forces them to hit you as an equal
- that alerts them that they are treating you as a lessor
- it allows them to see that they are abusing their power over you and to consider changing their behaviour.

And there's the twist - for the followers of Jesus, the slave who buried the talent, well, he was the hero - and he got hung out to dry for it - tossed into outer darkness for doing the honourable thing. Maybe that was the point Jesus was making - the kingdom isn't going to come easily/the powerful are invested in the status quo and if you challenge their way of thinking, you could lose everything. There's a challenge for us in what we will invest in and what we will not.

Invest in other approaches and solutions – like the Waldensians themselves do...

What can/is the CofS doing in this space?

Opportunities – car charging points in church car parks/reimagining our unnecessary buildings inter-faith peace house) seeds for growth/not being a money-making exercise but a mission-response exercise

The story of the talents ... actually a refusal to invest in the status quo ...

Closing Affirmation

Salty drop in a deep blue ocean

Grain of sand on an endless white beach

Leaf on a tree in a vast majestic forest, petal in a sea of poppies, blade of grass in a field green and growing ...

Part of something bigger – thanks be to God.

Note in a song, voice in a choir, instrument in a symphony of sound.

Word on a page, chapter in a story, character in an evolving saga ...

Face in a crowd, one in a million, or a billion – or 7 or 8 ...

Part of something bigger – thanks be to God.

When we don't see the beauty in the bigger picture, when we won't work well as a cog in-a-wheel, when we can't come round to the reality that the universe doesn't revolve around us, forgive.

Being human depends on others to be human with – help us embrace our interdependency.

Part of something bigger – how beautiful! Thanks be to you, God.