

Bennoch church: 16th February 2020

About 20%, and that is a very rough figure, of the population of the UK, live in poverty. 20% of the fifth largest economy in the world. That is a sobering thought. It rises to 34%, for children. A third of the children living in the UK, live in poverty. That might startle us, but a lot of poverty is 'hidden'. It is not just about homelessness on the street; for example, many people and families who use food banks, are part of the working population. It is easy to read figures about other people, but underlying these statistics is human suffering. No one wants to be part of them. And it should not be happening. The one thing you don't have when you are poor, is choice, and for many, there seems no way out.

So how do you define poverty? The Joseph Rowntree Foundation defines it as, "*poverty is when your resources are well below your minimum needs.*" For the UN and the World Bank; poverty is when you cannot afford the basic needs of life—food, clothing, shelter etc.

'Don't worry about the food and drink you need, or clothes, isn't life worth more than food or clothes. So don't worry where your food is going to come from...' My first thought? Matthew is obviously not poor! He was a tax man! These are easy words, when they don't speak to your situation. When you are not worried about where your next meal will come from, or heating the house in the winter.

I don't want to talk about Government policy, except to say this, the bible is all about justice. I don't want to talk about the benefit system, except to say, the bible talks about compassion. Justice. Compassion. That is our business. To point to it, and to speak up. That is what following the life of Jesus is all about.

This passage is also full of hope. It says, God cares. In the midst of our anxiety, God is there. And yes, life is far more important to God than food or clothing. I wonder what impact this passage would have on us if we were 'poor'? Answer: I don't know. But I know this, we all get anxious, and the promise of God's love is the same and never changes. If God feeds the birds and clothes the wild flowers, he will make provision for all of us. I know, that in itself does not remove out anxiety.

I read an interesting devotional passage recently that said, God does not worry. Here is part of it:

We tend to project our anxiety onto the Creator. We imagine God's hands wringing with concern over all our problems, pondering the next move. Nope. God's at peace. And God wants the same for us.

"Be still and know that I am God," Psalm 46:10 says. "Come to me, all you who are weary, and I will give you rest," Jesus said in Matthew 11:28. In Revelation 1:17, the Living One adds, "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last."

We know this in our head, but our hearts are hard to convince. But let's never forget that we are not in charge. When psychiatrist Curt Thompson visited our town some years back, his most memorable quote for me was, "God is not worried about your children." What? God doesn't care? That's not what he said. God cares, but God's not worried—not about them or anything or anyone else. God doesn't worry. Never thought of that. We do all the worrying and in his compassion and justice, God is relaxed.

Not entirely sure about that. For help in trying to understand what Matthew is saying, I decided to turn to a different translation of the passage. Eugene Peterson has done a good job with the 'Message' translation. Listen to his words,

"If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds.

²⁷⁻²⁹ *"Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen*

color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them."

I like that. In his language there is just a little turn of the dial, which changes the emphasis. For me the meaning is just a bit clearer, and it makes this passage speak to us all. It is first and foremost about following God. Deciding for God, and in that decision, seeing things differently. Our perspective changes. All of a sudden, it is not just about poverty or the essentials of life, that is still important; justice and compassion don't leave the table, but it is now about how, we view what we do have, whatever that is, as insignificant, and certainly not as important, as the Kingdom of God.

The song says, "*Seek ye first the Kingdom of God..*"

- a Kingdom where no one should live in poverty; that is the promise of God. May we work for justice and compassion.
- a Kingdom where our anxieties and God's peace come together; that is the promise of Christ. A peace that passes the understanding of the world.
- a Kingdom where we are pilgrim travellers, seeking God's hope and guided by the Spirit of God.

May the peace of Christ be with you all. Amen.