

Whenever You Have Done it to the Least

Saint Francis of Assisi, was born into a wealthy family and so he knew all about the trimmings of wealth. One day he was riding on a horse and met a man disfigured with leprosy. Francis was moved to dismount and hug the poor man. As he did so, the face of the leprosy sufferer changed into the face of Christ.

This little gem of a story sums up our Gospel reading today and it echoes the words of Jesus, *"Whenever you have done it to the least, you have done it to me."*

I want us to consider today, *Why should we care for the poor?*

Simply, we are following in the footsteps of our Master. What marks out the life of Jesus is his empathy for those on the margins of life. The Gospels are full of Jesus reaching out to the young, to the ill, to the excluded, to the oppressed and to all who struggle under the weights and pressures of life.

He once said, *"Come to me all who are heavy burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."* Matthew 11:25-30

So, as followers of Christ, we care for the poor simply because Christ cared for the poor, and this same Jesus is going to return to earth. That's what he is telling those who listened to his words and this speaks to us today, that Jesus Christ will return in the glory and he will sit on his glorious throne, to do what? - to bring judgement. He believed and why shouldn't we?

So, this parable gives us another reason why we should care for the poor, because this is what Jesus expects when he returns.

Jesus said, *"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was ill and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me."* Matthew 11:35

This is the criterion on which we will be judged when he returns or when he calls us.

But we don't do these things to try and win God's favour. We do these things because we love what God has done for us, and we want to please him and follow in his footsteps.

It's a family affair isn't it? We love and care for our family, and the whole reason is that we simply love them. Likewise, when we are in the Christian family, our whole reason for reaching out to the poor is that we are showing our love to Jesus through doing this.

On Monday morning I had the privilege of being at a Zoom meeting for the Presbytery World Mission Committee and it was led by Fiona Kendall, a Church of Scotland Mission Partner in Rome in Italy. Fiona is a lawyer and works as an advocate for Mediterranean Hope, a charity that helps refugees and migrants as they make their way through Europe in search of a better life.

She spoke of a town called Bihac in the northern border of Bosnia, where today over 10,000 migrants are trapped on the border. 65,000 have passed through this town in the last three years. She spoke of the desperate living conditions of these people. Torture, violence, confiscation...living in all sorts of accommodation, from living wild in the forests, tents, abandoned houses. These people are abused by many at the border, including the border guards, discriminated against and their human rights are openly violated.

Mediterranean Hope is beginning a project to help those unfortunate people. Fiona's account was moving and I have no reason not to believe what she was telling us. Of course this is just one of many humanitarian disasters happening round the world. But let us be thankful for Christian organisations like Med Hope, reaching out in the name of Jesus and making a huge difference. What is exciting about this project is that is ecumenical in its scope, bringing together the Federation of Protestant Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, working together for the poor – the very thing that Jesus asks of us. Can I commend this excellent work to your prayers and the great need amongst those migrants today? You can find more about Med. Hope on [their website](#).

However as Christians, sometimes we might be overwhelmed with the scale of the work.

There was a young lad who was walking along a beach, and there were thousands of starfish washed up. As he walked, he picked up some starfish and started to throw them back to the sea. One elderly gentleman passed him and said, *you're wasting your time, there are too many* and so the boy picked up another starfish and tossed it into the sea and said, *I can't save them all but I can save this one.*

That's so true. We can't save them all, but we can do our part to help.

Today marks the beginning of Christian Aid Week and Christian Aid focuses on another humanitarian disaster, [its website](#) has on its front page these words:

"This climate crisis hurts us all. But people living in poverty fight the worst of it every day. From drought to flooding, climate change robs people of control over their lives. Extreme weather means people struggle to survive without a reliable source of water."

"People living on poverty fight the worst of it every day."

Jesus knew this because he himself was a refugee. He was born into poverty with no home to be born in. It's not surprising that he rallies the cry to care for such, and that he blesses Christians and organisations who make the poor a priority.

Climate change is a major factor of the refugee issue as they leave their homes because of lack of food, water or fighting over land issues because of climate change, which drives people from their communities.

Christian Aid is a charity that began after the second world war, when a Church of Scotland minister saw the poverty that Germans were facing in their homeland, and so he started to reach out to a country that had been at war with his own country.

He wanted to continue the fight, with Germany this time as an ally; the fight was not *against* people but *with* people, and to fight the common enemy of poverty.

Our hymn books have hymns that speak about *"Fighting the good fight with all thy might"*. *"Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war"*...and the Christian faith was born at a time when people had to fight for their lives.

The Salvation Army was well named for not just bringing salvation to the *hearts* of people but also salvation of body and mind. William Booth saw the desperate need and reached into our towns and cities, calling people to fight the war against poverty and hopelessness.

"You cannot warm the hearts of people with God's love if they have an empty stomach and cold feet." ~ William Booth

Much of the Bible is written out of a time of persecution – it is seen through the perspective of people who are oppressed. That's why it resonates today so well in places of poverty – churches thrive under these conditions. For it's then that we meet a God who cares for the poor and the marginalised.

Where is us our fight today?

Well, Christian Aid take this fight up for us, They state: *"Together with our supporters and partners, we aim*

- *to expose poverty throughout the world*
- *to help in practical ways to end it*
- *to highlight, challenge and change the structures and systems that favour the rich and powerful over the poor and marginalised.*

Christian Aid is part of a global movement for change

Together, we have great influence and impact. We want people to pray with us, to act, to give and to get involved with us in a variety of ways.

We work to educate and mobilise people from all kinds of backgrounds to build a movement that can change the course of history and bring social justice to all.

We campaign to ensure a more equal division of power in the world, promoting the rights and voices of women and girls – and anyone discriminated against because of who they are.

We push our political leaders to tackle climate change and tax dodging – which hit the poorest the hardest – and for our society to welcome those who have been forced to flee their homes overseas."

They are fighting the good fight alongside charities such as Scottish Refugee Council, Mediterranean Hope and many others.

We might never be on the front line; we might never get to Bihac to meet these migrants or join Christian Aid workers on the front line, but we can support them in so many ways.

Going back to the parable and we see that not only is Christ coming back but Christ is already here. He is here in the poor. *Whenever you have done it to the least you've done it to me* and there is something wonderful about this verse because it brings home to us the reality that in each beggar and impoverished person is the image of the Son of God.

One of the great things that we do each year in this Church is the Shoe Box Appeal, and to see some of the videos that are made after the children receive a shoe box is amazing, but it goes deeper than this, because inside each shoe box is the invitation and opportunity and follow up for someone to come to faith and to belief in Jesus Christ, the very thing that we are about as a Church.

So, these children will be given the opportunity to have the greatest gift of all, the knowledge that there is a God who loves them; a God who is on their side; a God who will walk with them; and many will be orphans and many will have little support, but the difference one shoe box may make to a child's life cannot be calculated.

So, as we begin Christian Aid Week, I appeal to you to follow Jesus, to walk in his ways and to reach out to those that God places in your path, and as you do remember that in that person is the face of Christ, *whenever you have done it to the least you have done it to me.*

Let me finish with this story, Martin of Tours was a Roman soldier and a Christian. One freezing day a beggar asked him for money. Martin had no money, but seeing the man blue with cold, he ripped his soldier's cloak in half and gave one part to the beggar. That night he had a dream. He saw Jesus in the courts of heaven, wearing half his cloak. He heard an angel ask, *"Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you? And Jesus replied, My servant Martin gave it to me."*