

Sunday 14 July 2013

Readings: Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Luke 10:25-37

I expect for many of you there has been a book you read when you were young that has shaped the way you see the world. It gave you a lens through which you interpreted what you heard or read ; a framework for deciding what was important, and for relating things to each other.

For me one of those books was *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* by Ronald Sider¹. It addressed the issue of world hunger at a time when half the world's population was badly nourished, according to a UN report in 1974. (And the good news is that, so far as I can work out, there has been a 21% decrease overall in hunger in the developing world between 1990 and 2006. But malnutrition still affects 26% of children under five (and as much as 46% in Southern Asia)².

Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger was the place where I learned something about the economics of aid, the inequality between First World and Third World, the haves and the have-nots, the way that economic and political structures support the system based on such inequality, the fallacy of the 'trickle down' approach to issues of wealth and poverty, and the challenge to go beyond giving food or money in a crisis to doing something about the underlying structural issues that caused the crisis.

This was a book that sought to provide a biblical perspective on poverty and possessions, I read things there that I didn't remember having heard before. It highlighted God's concern for the poor and the disadvantaged, those who had little or no power. Even though it was an uncomfortable thought, I heard about God's bias towards the poor, liberating people oppressed and enslaved in the Exodus, speaking out against economic and social injustice through the prophets, identifying with the poor in the life of Jesus.

My attention was drawn to so many passages like Psalm 82 which we read today -

Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.³

I discovered that this call for justice for the weak, for those without economic or political power (orphans and widows), was to be found throughout the Bible.

And prophets like Amos linked spiritual life and economic life – to live as God's people meant much more than just how you worshiped: it meant not exploiting the poor, not treating them as worthless.

...they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—
they [] trample the head of the poor
into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way⁴

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan
who are on Mount Samaria,
who oppress the poor, who crush the needy⁵

1 Sider, Ronald J *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* IVP 1975

2 <http://globalpovertyproject.com/infobank/ch/child>

3 Psalm 82:3,4

4 Amos 2:6,7

5 Amos 4:1

Amos condemned the religiosity of the wealthy in Israel, those who worshiped God with great piety on the Sabbath, but then exploited the poor and amassed wealth for themselves through the rest of the week. Amos declared

“let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream⁶

In Psalm 82 God is calling on the gods of the nations, or the powers that be, to give an account of themselves, because they have not upheld the rights of the poor and the needy. God is judging the earth – which means calling for justice on the earth, justice and right relationships between people, relationships which recognised the worth of all, the rights of all, the responsibility which people have for each other.

That sort of justice and judgment lies behind Amos' image of the plumbline. With the plumbline God is holding Israel to account, showing that Israel's life has got 'out of line' with God's intentions. The plumb line represents an alignment between the uprightness of God's law and the harmony of just social relations. But Israel has moved far from that. Amos decries the economic exploitation of the powerless and the commonplace humiliation of the lowly. He identifies the role of religion in masking such injustice, and he rages against the way that official worship effectively justifies social sin. It is because of who Israel is, the people whom God had chosen, that he speaks so harshly, -

You only have I known of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities⁷

Amos' condemnation doesn't sit easily with us. It is really uncomfortable, even more so when we remember that not many years after Amos spoke and wrote, Assyria invaded Israel, the northern kingdom, and took the people into exile, just as Amos had said. Where is the grace of God in such condemnation and destruction? Karl Barth argued that we should interpret Amos's Israel through the election of Jesus Christ as the rejected one⁸ – Jesus took our place, coming under God's rejection even as Israel had done, undergoing death on our behalf. If God's people continue to pursue a path that is so far removed from God's will, exploiting the poor and failing to uphold justice, then repentance, turning back to God, will require dying to such a way of life if God's grace and salvation are to be real for them.

One of the things that has struck me as I have thought again about *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* and the impact it had on me 35 years ago is what has changed since I first read the book. It seems to me that much of what it describes in terms of the inequality between the haves and the have-nots has come rather closer to home.

You may have heard of the Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty which produced a report early this year. It says: “As many as 25 percent of children – about 270,000 – currently live in poverty.”⁹ And that's twice what it was 30 years ago. The report proposes 78 recommendations to reduce child poverty and mitigate its effects. Children are always the weakest and most vulnerable in our society – so the biblical call to “rescue the weak and needy; defend the rights of the lowly” must apply to them.

I went to a lecture this week given by Prof. Robert Wade from LSE. You may have read an article about him in the ODT two weeks ago, or heard the interview he did with Kim Hill.¹⁰ Prof Wade has

6 Amos 5:24

7 Amos 3:2

8 reference in *Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol.3*, Bartlett, D L and Brown Taylor, B(eds.), Westminster John Knox Press 2010, p.222

9 *Solutions to Child Poverty in New Zealand: evidence for action*, <http://www.occ.org.nz/>

10 http://podcast.radionz.co.nz/sat/sat-20130629-0815-robert_wade_inequality-048.mp3

researched the rapid growth of inequality in many western societies, including USA, UK, Australia and NZ, in the past 30 years. The inequality gap between the lowest and highest incomes in NZ, in fact between the majority of incomes and the highest incomes, has grown at a very rapid rate, and is now very much greater than it was (in NZ and in USA) when *Rich Christians* was written. So some of the issues of justice and poverty and exploitation are now part of the discussion going on here in NZ, not just about countries out there. What is the effect of such rapidly increasing inequality? Who loses out and why? Is it a good thing, and if not (as much evidence suggests) what can be done to change it?

One of the questions raised by the parable of the Good Samaritan is what is our responsibility, and our response, to those who are in need. What limits are there? That seems to be behind the lawyer's question: "Who then is my neighbour?" He had demonstrated that he knew the Law, he knew that God put a priority on love of neighbour – and he knew that the passage he quoted, from Leviticus, speaks of 'neighbour' in the context of the community of Israel: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself."¹¹

But as you have probably realised, the story of the Good Samaritan doesn't actually answer the lawyer's question directly. (Given that it's Jesus doing the answering, are we surprised?) The lawyer is asking for a handy checklist of neighbours, perhaps two or three degrees of neighbourliness, and clear criteria with which he can rule out those people who are beyond the limit of love. He is looking for the law of love. What are the rules - what are the boundaries – what are the provisos? Exactly who am I to love as myself? Because once he can nail down how far his loving has to extend, then the lawyer can get on with doing what needs to be done to inherit eternal life.

But Jesus is demonstrating love as grace, as free gift. And the neighbour is one who shows mercy. Go and do likewise!¹²

In his speech "I've Been to the Mountaintop," Martin Luther King, Jr. said:
"The priest and the Levite ask, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?'
But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"¹³

Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger has shaped much of my thinking about issues of justice and inequality and power, because it showed me that God's heart has always had a special concern for those who have nothing, those who are oppressed and exploited, those who are at the bottom of the heap, those who are powerless.

But the question I ask myself is, how much has it shaped my action?

The story Jesus tells reminds me of that – because the neighbour is the one who does not pass by on the other side, but who stops and gets involved. And who happens to be an enemy, an outcast himself. And so the challenge of Jesus' words comes to me again, and to each of us - "go and do likewise".

11 Leviticus 19:18

12 Luke 10:37

13 <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>