

'The Poor you always have with you.' (John 12:8)

What implications do you think this saying of Jesus might have for Christian ethics today?

On first reading the saying seems to imply that poverty will never be eradicated in spite of best efforts, and that Christians should not be overly concerned with such an intractable problem [*intractable* *adj.* (of a person) difficult to influence (of a problem or illness) hard to solve or cure]. However, the context for this saying provides important clues to acquiring a better understanding of the problem of poverty and the proper Christian response. John's account has Mary's extravagant act of anointing Jesus with extremely expensive perfume (valued at close to a year's wage for a farm labourer) criticised by Judas Iscariot, who wonders why the poor were not beneficiaries of the sale of such expensive perfume. The modern Christian reader may infer [*infer* *v.* -*ferring*, -*ferred*. work out from evidence. —*inference* *n.*] from Jesus' support of Mary that the 'divine' valuation of a gift depends solely on the motive and disposition of the giver; what she gave represented her all; by giving her most precious possession she gave herself. In the same way, the two copper coins given by the poor widow to the Temple treasury (cf. Mk 12:41-44) represented a total self-sacrificial giving to God. In the sight of God, the expensive perfume and the copper coins, given with such love, amount to the same. In Christian thinking, we are fundamentally poor in that our basic desire for God is not completely met in this age - *our heart is restless until it rests in You* (Augustine). To realise our utter dependence on God is to be *poor in spirit*, a disposition which marks us as possessors of the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Matt 5, *Beatitudes*). Still, it remains to consider the saying in its implications for Christian ethics today, especially for the Christian response to material poverty.

On a general level, then, the Christian ethicist can assert that the problem of poverty is not dealt with merely on the level of economics - 'Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor?' is unanswerable if one were only concerned with an economic redistribution of wealth. Mary's act is indefensible on strict utilitarian grounds; three hundred silver coins distributed among the poor would surely have contributed more to the sum of human happiness. Nonetheless, Jesus defends her action. Christians today may draw from this the insight that total devotion to Christ is the necessary prerequisite [*prerequisite* *n., adj.* (something) that must happen or exist before something else is possible] to right living, it enables the highest ethical life - the one inspired by *agape*. Further, the incident reflects the Christian vision of things, this being that the world's fundamental problems are chronic [*chronic* *adj.* lasting a long time; habitual, e.g. a chronic smoker. — *chronically* *adv.*]; at best, humans can only try to relieve their worst effects. In working to provide interim solutions the Christian realises that the final solution lies with a new world order in which all creation is brought together under Christ (cf. Ephesians 1:10). 'The poor you always have with you' might be paraphrased to 'the world will never be perfect until it is all perfected in me, at the end of time'. It is not a Christian view to regard humanity as ultimately its own saviour for this amounts to the folly and idolatry of Man as *substitutio Dei*.

This vision of reality does away with a powerful humanist spur to work against poverty (namely, that with concerted efforts the problem will be eradicated forever). The question is: What should spur the Christian to work against poverty, if not the prospect

of its eventual eradication? We should note that the knowledge of a problem's persistence in spite of efforts does not necessarily beget a 'then why should I bother trying?' attitude. *'The poor you always have with you'* seems to echo Moses' instructions to the Israelites concerning the needy among them: *'There will always be some Israelites who are poor and in need, and so I command you to be generous to them'* (Deut 15:11). Thus, a problem's persistence is, in itself, the very spur to work against it. In the Christian understanding, the Great Commandment sets no limits to neighbourliness - the religious and racial limits of Israel have been breached by the Kingdom's establishment in Jesus the Christ. Further, since Jesus identifies himself with the poor, the least of my brethren (cf. Matt 25:31-46, *Parable of the Sheep and the Goats*), then the Christian should all the more be concerned to meet the need around them as best they can. *'The poor you always have with you'* can be understood to mean the continuing presence of the suffering face of Christ right to the end of time in the faces of the poor. This presents Christians with a grave privilege: in ministering to the needy they have the privilege of ministering to Christ himself, in neglecting the needy they incur on themselves the grave responsibility of neglecting Christ. The statement above emphasises that the grounds for judgement will not change: the Christian will be judged on their love-in-action; there will always be needy people around to call on this love. The poor being *'with you'* means that they and their plight cannot be out of sight for the Christian unless, of course, the Christian prefers to blind himself or look away. Wogaman's memorable phrase: *'The poverty of the poor represents the estrangement of the rich'* is apt here.

In some sense, a response to poverty may derive from a desire to remove a 'general mess', an unpleasant, bothersome

phenomenon in our world. The more poverty is seen in the abstract the further it departs from a Christian awareness. A general beneficence [**beneficent** [bin-eff-iss-ent] *adj.* charitable or generous. —**beneficence** *n.*] towards humanity is not the same as *'love thy neighbour ...'* The latter is a call to Christians to respond to a needy person in the particular circumstances of their need. This call remains a spur even in view of the fact that poverty will never be completely removed from the face of the earth in the present age. Christian giving remains within the domain of personal transaction: the giver, the receiver, the gift; only then does giving really equate to *sharing*. One shares with a person, not with a mass of poverty. Furthermore, in seeing the receiver as a person, the Christian is led to question why the poor are poor, whence comes a commitment to discern what in structures and systems contributes to poverty.

If the poor are to remain then, the Christian may construe, the causes of poverty will persist. The implication for Christian ethics is that a proper response to poverty will take in efforts to attack its human causes, for example: the consumer-driven mentality in which greed appears as something more respectable, the economic *status quo* in which love of money, the root of all evils (cf. 1 Timothy 6:10), sets hard into structures which justify by appeal to market forces the oppression of many. Catholic social teaching is clear on the dangers of an unbridled capitalism - *It is unacceptable to say that the defeat of so-called 'real socialism' leaves capitalism as the only model of economic organisation. It is necessary to break down the barriers and monopolies which leave so many countries on the margins of development ...* (John Paul II, 1991). A strong theme in Liberation Theology is the diabolical enslavement resulting from attachment to wealth over human beings - *'Mammon is riches as anti-God'* (Gutierrez). In fact the Catholic vision

sees all the earth's resources as placed at the disposal of humanity; God intended all to share in this bounty. The poor's continuing presence among us indicates that a basic injustice - a few preventing many from having a share in God's bounty - will persist. Consequently, Christian giving is not only a matter of charity but also of justice. This awareness is apparent in St John Chrysostom's words: *'Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs.'*

In summary, then, the context of Jesus' saying reminds Christians of that prior dedication to Christ which is the ground of Christian living in all its aspects, ethical and other. For the Christian there should be no

conflict between spirituality and active endeavour for justice; morality springs forth as a *response* to being one with God in Christ. The saying above also reminds Christians of the real spur to respond to the needy, this being the fact that another human is in need rather than the prospect of eradicating poverty - this will only be a realised in the eschatological fulfilment of the age. Presently Christians are to be concerned with that constant endeavour to build up the Kingdom on earth, an endeavour that leads Christians not only to reach out to those in need but also to consider why they are in need. In no way is the saying above to be construed by Christians as a call to neglect the poor; their continuing presence is a ceaseless cry for justice to which Christians must respond.