

CHAPTER 3

Love the Urban Poor

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'Business as usual' for the people of God is to love and serve the poor

The church in our nation is forever on the move. I'd love to say we are advancing, but in reality it feels more like we simply can't keep still, like an irritable child prone to fidget. We change direction at pace and call it 'new vision'. Like Tarzan, we swing wildly from strategy to strategy, as the testimonies, techniques and talents of others convince us to move on to greener grass. We swing from attractional church to missional communities, from cell church to café church and on to Messy Church without our feet touching the ground. From seeker-friendly to seeker-centred, from social action to sung worship.

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I hope and pray that the desire for change reflects our desperation to reach the last, the least and the lost. However, my fear is that our church is often seeking to land in the place most appealing to the first, the finest and the found! Maybe the pace of cultural change demands that the church evolves – I have heard that standing still is as good as going backwards. But who do we leave behind in our reckless pursuit of relevance?

Interestingly, Jesus told us of one thing that would never change; one thing that would stand the course of time and exist from one generation to the next. He spoke of something that social transformation could never flee from, and cultural evolution could never shake off; an issue that affects every nation, tribe and tongue, and therefore should affect the nature of every church.

‘THE POOR YOU WILL ALWAYS HAVE WITH YOU’

As Jesus made his final journey to Jerusalem, he stopped off for lunch at the home of Simon the leper in a place called Bethany. It was there, whilst clearly still very much living and breathing and reclining at the table, Jesus was anointed for his forthcoming burial. A woman standing close by broke an alabaster jar of expensive perfume and then poured its contents over the head of Jesus, much to the displeasure of one particular disciple. Jesus responds to Judas with these incredible words: ‘The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me’ (Matthew 26:11).

A profound moment, marked with profound words that are profoundly misunderstood. *The poor you will always have with you...* Many things will change but one thing will remain – the poor will always be around. What I find so concerning is that many in the

church have chosen to adopt these words as their excuse for apathy in the face of poverty: ‘If Christ said that there will always be poor people, then what is the point of trying to make a difference?’ they seem to say. But is this passage really a prophecy about humankind’s innate inability to solve the poverty issue? Can this passage really be used to justify doing little or nothing to serve the poor? No, these words do not signify Jesus carefully lifting his church off the hook of responsibility. These words were not meant to paralyse the people of God – in fact, quite the opposite.

With those words, Jesus was highlighting his imminent departure. He would soon be gone. The people of God had only a fleeting moment to worship ‘the Word made flesh’ in the flesh. It was the tiniest window of opportunity within which to worship the Emmanuel, God incarnate, before it was back to business as usual. And ‘business as usual’ for the people of God is to love and serve the poor. The poor will always be with you, so you will always have a responsibility to serve them. They are your people. They are your neighbours so you must love them as you love yourself.

MAKING POVERTY PERSONAL

Listen to Deuteronomy 15:7-11...

‘If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward them. Rather, be open-handed and freely lend them whatever they need. Be careful not to harbour this wicked thought: “The seventh year, the year for cancelling debts, is near,” so that you

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do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.'

As the people of God, we have become accustomed to opening our hands in worship. We lift our arms and open our hands whilst we sing anthems of praise. Yet we forget that we are called to be soft-hearted and open-handed towards the poor among us. Our people. Our neighbours.

Our heart for the urban poor is not exceptional or radical – it is essential. Our passion for those experiencing poverty does not start with a moment of divine inspiration – it starts with simple obedience. I don't believe there is a special gifting of compassion for the broken. Our heart for the poor isn't an optional extra, but an unavoidable consequence of true worship.

Tim Keller writes: 'Indifference to the poor and disadvantaged means there has not been a true grasp of our salvation by sheer grace.' You cannot love God with all your heart and not share his heart of love for others. We are compelled to act by the love that God has for the least and the lost and the last. The more I worship God, the louder I hear his voice for those rejected and abandoned.

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We have a God who loves his people with such passion that he would send his only Son to be the rescue plan. We received Christ who not only associated himself with the despised and the rejected, but became so himself. We have a Saviour who not only sat among the poor but also became poor in order to save us. Our passion for the urban poor comes from God and yet it is only a shadow of the love our God has for those affected by poverty.

How can we convince God we are loving him with our best, and loving our neighbours as ourselves, whilst failing to love and serve the poor among us? One solution is to move away from the poor. If you can't alleviate the problem, you have to strive to alleviate the guilt the problem causes. We all too easily shield our eyes from seeing the poor and shelter our lives from the issues of poverty altogether.

We must make poverty personal again. Gustavo Gutierrez writes: 'You say you care about the poor? Then tell me, what are their names?' We must allow ourselves to be exposed to the harsh reality of the nation's poverty and its complexities. We need to eyeball hardship and dwell in disadvantage and not simply walk on by, hoping someone else will bring healing. Has the church become the priest on the Jericho road that fails to stop and minister to the man that was beaten to within an inch of his life?

I believe the church in our nation is failing the poor. I have spoken to many potential church planters, full of good intentions to grow churches in my city. As I enquire as to their new church location, my heart almost always drops as the same rhetoric is repeated. Churches are planted everywhere but areas of deprivation. Some come for the students, others for the coffee-drinking hipsters, but it is rare I meet anyone seeking to plant into poverty.

REDISTRIBUTING KINGDOM RESOURCES

In 1971 Dr Julian Tudor Hart completed his research into what he termed 'The Inverse Care Law.' Tudor Hart was the first to recognise the link between health and wealth. His research proved that those with greater means are likely to receive a greater quality of health-care. Anecdotally this is evidenced in the disparity of life expectancy between an Eden neighbourhood and that of a wealthy suburb. This trend is repeated in education: the more affluent you are, the more likely you are to receive a higher standard of school.

Sadly, I believe this trend extends to the church. Our most vibrant churches are not found in the most deprived areas of the country. The Church of England invests over 50% more per head into affluent churches. The wealthiest churches by their very nature contain the greatest levels of resourcing. Plenty of pounds and palatial properties attract the best people. Prosperity is an upward spiral; poverty is the opposite.

This is not the kingdom of God that I read about in the scriptures: a kingdom established by the one who did not see equality with God as something to be grasped. A kingdom formed by the one who emptied himself and made himself nothing. A kingdom in which the weak shame the strong. A kingdom that belongs to the poor.

The Eden Network is passionate about the redistribution of kingdom resources. We want to strengthen the local church in deprived communities. We ask people to relocate into areas of deprivation. We talk of being countercultural and opting for downward mobility. We ask people to choose the downward spiral for the sake of the least, the last and the lost. It is an honour to one of the six hundred or so people who have already made that move. I am

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proud to be have been a volunteer in one of our fifty or so teams that have joined the mission of God into some of our nation's hardest places. I am overjoyed that our team was tasked to plant one of the 18 churches that Eden has initiated over the years. The church in disadvantaged neighbourhoods should not be disadvantaged further by the church, and I love that Eden is playing its part in redressing the imbalance.

So why are we specifically passionate about urban poverty? It might appear that a movement named 'Eden' would be more focused on rural deprivation – that we'd be passionate about places where flowers, forests and fruit abound! But in fact we're people most passionate about the concrete jungles where grass is grown with hydroponics and fruit comes in tins! The Eden Network takes its name from our first team which was planted some 20 years ago. Wythenshawe, located in South Manchester, was built as a 'garden city', to rehouse some of Manchester's poorest residents. Providing the disadvantaged with newly built properties with gardens nicely situated on tree-lined streets had its benefits, but ripping people from their networks and neighbours and relocating them in Europe's largest council estate, dislocated from the city, was ill-advised. For many years Wythenshawe was the nation's most deprived place, right at the top of the UK Government's Indices of Deprivation for England.

Among other scriptures, Eden was inspired by Ezekiel 36:

“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt. The desolate land will be

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cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it. They will say, “This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited.” Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the Lord have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it’ (vv. 33-36).

It’s fascinating to me that scripture starts with a garden and ends with a city. This migration from rural to urban dwelling is happening at a greater speed than at any other point in the history of the planet. Urbanisation is unrelenting with an estimated 190,000 new city dwellers added to the world’s urban population *every day*. The UN forecasts that today’s urban population of 3.2 billion will rise to nearly 5 billion by 2030, with 2 billion of them living in city slums. The poorest people in the world are now found in cities. As cities continue to grow, the issues of urban poverty are set to increase.

Eden is passionate about urban areas of deprivation because that’s where the greatest concentration of those facing poverty are found. God comes close to the broken-hearted and he does that by sending his people. Our movement of incarnational relocators is just getting started. If all this stirs your heart, perhaps you’ll pray with me, ‘Here I am Lord, send me’ (Isaiah 6:8).