

Poverty (3): Economics

Scripture

Gen 13.2-9; Lev 25.8-12, 23f; Deu 15.7f; 1 Kng 21.1-24; Pss 10; 73; 113; Isa 55.1-5; Jer 5.26-31; Eze 18.7-9; Hos 12.6-8; Amo 8.4-6; Mic 6.8-12; Hab 2.6-14; Mt 6.19-21; Mk 10.17-22; Lk 12.32-34; 16.19-31; Act 4.32-35; 2 Cor 8.9, 13-14; 9.6-14; Gal 6.2; Heb 13.1f; Jam 5.1-6; 1 Jn 3.16-18; Rev 18.

Graih

1): Brian came to the island following his brother, looking for a better life. Despite years of struggle with heroin addiction he was keen to start afresh and to work. As he got to grips with his substance abuse Brian found work at a fish factory, processing fresh catches of scallops and mussels. It wasn't without difficulty, as it required Brian to travel some distance each day on the bus and this took up valuable funds that were already scarce. Nevertheless, Brian threw himself into the work with enthusiasm. As we talked to him about the job it became obvious that there were deeper problems: Brian didn't seem to be earning much money. Hardly any money in fact, and certainly not enough to live on. The factory operated a system of 'piece work', where Brian got paid for the weight of the scallops he processed. On paper the factory claimed that it was possible to earn the minimum wage but in practice that never happened. There was also a constant delay in getting Brian a contract, which meant that he worked for a long time without anything on paper. Brian, confused and ignorant of his rights as well as scared of losing his job, eventually came with us to talk to the Department of Economic Development and the Industrial Affairs group. There was actually little that the authorities could do and Brian was left in the vulnerable position of either remaining in an exploitative job or losing desperately-desired employment.

Clive had been on job-seekers' benefit for some time. He was keen to work as he recovered from a distressing breakdown. He was always a keen contributor to Graih's work programme. When Benefits offered Clive a voluntary placement he had little choice but to accept; although it was 'voluntary' his benefits, and therefore all his income, would be stopped if he didn't engage. To Clive's astonishment he was placed in a local business, working full-time. This business received other forms of support from the state and told Clive on his first day that there would be no permanent job for him after the placement had finished. It seemed that Clive was working full-time for a benefit he was already entitled to, while the state implicitly subsidised a private business. The other staff in the business were mostly on zero-hour contracts, allowing the business to avoid any job security or payment of in-work entitlements like sick or maternity pay. Clive had no choice but to participate and, like Brian, was not in a position to speak out about the exploitation for fear of losing what little he had.

2): The Isle of Man is a very affluent haven in the affluent Minority World. If there was ever a place where wealth should 'trickle down' from the high earners to benefit the rest of society, it should be here. This is not the case. Graih sees people at the bottom, exploited by business out to make a profit and marginalised by the very benefit system set up to help them. While the island handles untold wealth through its creative servicing of tax affairs and trusts the poor are left on the margins and public services are relentlessly cut back. Economics remains the bottom line, while justice or social wellbeing (peace) are left to one side as expensive or optional concerns. It is important to place the microcosm of the guys that Graih sees within the global perspective. Many of the poor flee to the island to escape poverty elsewhere. In much of the Majority World this poverty is exacerbated by offshore financial centres like the Isle of Man draining much-needed tax revenue from government coffers. This is one symptom of an even broader problem across global finances. The very structures are set up to ensure that money flows to the already-wealthy, to those of us in

the Minority World and, within that world, to the smaller elites of the ultra-rich. Whether it is fish factories exploiting piece-work labourers or multinationals shifting profits on a global scale to avoid taxation the principle is the same: the poor must stay poor, their labour exploited, while the rich get richer at their expense.

Questions

1. Are you wealthy?
2. Scripture frequently links wealth with power and oppression, while it never links poverty to these things. Why? What does this tell us?
3. What is the purpose of wealth? Jesus and Paul seem to plead for equality and radical generosity. What does this look like?
4. Does Jesus' pattern of 'being rich yet becoming poor for us' affect the way we should treat wealth and possessions?
5. 'Inequality' has recently been linked to myriad social ills. Do you agree that the existence of the very rich and the very poor is a bad thing? Why?
6. Capitalism as we experience it (and the lifestyles we enjoy) fundamentally require the existence of a large number of poor people producing wealth for a small number of rich people. Is this right? What should a Christian response look like?

Ideas for further action

1. Invite poor people to speak to your group about their life. This could be the local poor or the global poor through such groups as Christian Aid (www.christianaid.org.uk) or the Jubilee Debt Campaign (www.jubileedebt.org.uk). A Manx-based group looking at global issues is the One World Centre (www.oneworldcentreiom.org).
2. Commit to accountability in your finances with Christians outside your biological family. This could be done by sharing bank statements and committing to disciplined generosity, supporting one another in this.
3. Identify ways that you, as individuals and as a group, can give extravagantly.
4. Practise sharing things so that you need less, freeing you to give more. What needs to change in your lifestyle to allow this to happen? Does everyone need a car, for example?
5. Take up the cause of exploited workers with government departments or your MHK(s).
6. Imagine and embody a different economic system that is more in tune with God's kingdom. What does this look like on the Isle of Man? Transition Network has some excellent resources around innovative local economy (www.transitionnetwork.org). TaxWatch is a local group discussing tax justice in the context of the Isle of Man (contact: philcraigne44@gmail.com).

Prayer

Father, thank you that you are an extravagant God. You bless us with such abundance, with life itself. Teach us to have the same impulse to extravagant generosity in all we do.

Jesus, thank you that you never forgot the poor but called them blessed. Thank you that in the vulnerability of poverty we meet you. Help us to follow where you lead, no matter what it costs.

Spirit, thank you that you rage against oppression and injustice, whether it is in our hearts or the structures and powers of this world. Inspire us with your creative anger to enter into a life and build a world marked by your justice and peace.

Amen.