

**Title: Creationtide: Am I the rich oppressor?**

**Scripture references: Mark 7:24-37, James 2:1-10, Isaiah 35.4-7**

**Sermon 8<sup>th</sup> September**

Each year "*The Sunday Times*" produces "The Rich List", a list of something like 500 of the richest people in Britain, and I remember one day being a little naughty on a Sunday. I marched down to the newsagents and got a copy, and then studied carefully the people on that list, to work out what they did that got them wealth, and what I was doing wrong.

Well, newsflash, an awful lot of them basically **inherited their wealth!** And the others mainly **started off rich** and then invested in key things such as oils, metals, etc, that fuel our economy.

**I wonder why there isn't a "poor list?"** Funny that I don't think I would have gone out and bought that list. Riches are so attractive, but poverty...no thank you.

Yet the book of James is adamant that **it is the rich who oppress and the poor who are blessed.** And this is seen so clearly when we consider climate change.

I know a senior UN person who was offered the opportunity by their financial advisor, who seemed oblivious to the person's job, of investing in weapons manufacturers and oil firms. The UN person was rather horrified, and reminded their banker that they worked against those exact things!

This is what money does to us: **it blinds us to moral integrity, and invites us to make compromises.** The banker was not thinking "let's exploit war", but he was being part of that system.

It is the rich who are flying to and fro across the world in private jets, who consider themselves too aloof to be with the rest of us, who own 20 supercars and 3 super-yachts, while ordinary folk are lucky to take one flight on holiday a year.

10 countries in today's world produce 66%, 2/3rds, of all the world's pollution. China leads, the USA is second. Nearly all of it **for the sake of acquiring power and wealth.**

And who **suffers?** Chad, Somalia, DRC, South Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Bangladesh. You don't need me to tell you these are the poorest countries on earth, yet also the most affected by changes in the climate caused by human pollution.

**South Sudan** for example has seen increased temperatures, killing off plants and crops, and increasing the desertification of the land, when the soil becomes unable to grow food. And then, when the rains do come, they come with such ferocity and speed that the soils cannot cope and floods occur, destroying the few crops that existed.

And all of this fuels **violence** and **conflict**. People who cannot eat, who are hungry, who have lost everything, become more **desperate**. Some flee as refugees; some turn to gangs who offer food in exchange for violence.

Do you see the connections? Oxfam did research that found that the emissions from the investments of 125 billionaires averaged **3.1 million tonnes per billionaire**.

This is more than a **million times** more than the average emissions of the **bottom 90% of the world's population**.

James was right. The rich *are* oppressing the poor.

And then there are differentiations of 'poor'. And **the bottom of the poor, are women**. It is women who are raped in the conflicts of the DRC. It is women who are forced into prostitution to survive. It is women who are paid less than the men. It is women who cannot flee when the climate changes. Women get left behind.

So when Jesus met the Syrophenician woman in our gospel, he is meeting someone who is not in a position of power; someone who is **alien** to the Jews among whom Jesus walked. But Jesus has time for her. He listens to her plea, noting that this outsider has trusted that Jesus, someone foreign to her people, might just be kind enough to help her.

In Greek, Jesus' reply to her is "let the children be fed first, it's not right to give the children's bread to the family pet dog". This is more familial language, **inviting her to respond**.

And she does respond to this **word game**, recognising the smile and glint in the eye of Jesus. "Yes Lord, but the family dog gets the crumbs from the children!" In doing so, she brings herself into the story, albeit in a lowly way, but one that Jesus welcomes.

In this exchange, Jesus has crossed so many boundaries: he's talking to a **foreigner**. He's shown the crowd around him that these "foreign dogs" are **actually people of faith**. And he's talked to a **woman**, against the cultural divide.

And that woman, who engaged with Jesus, goes away with a **daughter liberated from oppression**. She engaged with the foreign Jew, Jesus, and discovered his **love extended beyond racial boundaries**. That encounter turned her life – and her daughter's life – around.

She embodied the message of **Isaiah** the prophet: be courageous! God is here, he will save, so let the rejoicing start because healing shall come!

**When we truly encounter Jesus, he doesn't leave us as we were**. And this is the key: encountering Jesus. This is where everything must start: not in being nice, or going along with whatever the cultural zeitgeist is at our moment in history, but a **one-to-one wrestling with Jesus Christ** the Lord. Because as we wrestle with his words, and spend time in prayer and reading those words, he begins to change us, challenge us, mould us and renew us.

And that might lead us to asking questions, and seeing the world around us differently.

It's fine to condemn the rich and famous, **but what if I'm the rich and famous?** I have a bank account. I have some savings. But a World Bank report from 2012 said that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the world's poorest people don't even have bank accounts... compared to them, I am the rich.

I fly to family in the UK, to Angela's family in the US. Sure, I use trains and public transport in Geneva, but compared to the average person from Mali, I am causing huge amounts of pollution.

**Am I the oppressor? Jesus is calling me to challenge my way of life.**

And I live in democracies in the powerful West. I have rights and a voice. So many people – especially women – have none of these. I have a duty to use my voice to try and care for those who have so little and face so much oppression and suffering.

**Jesus is challenging me – and perhaps you – to speak up for my sisters and brothers who are truly poor.**

If this speaks to you, don't beat yourself up, take heart. **Jesus turns us around. Jesus renews us. And Jesus works through his church to do that.**

And as part of that, we invite you to come to the course we are running on Wednesday evening. A 7pm start, we will have Blair Matheson, from **Franciscans International**, telling us about his work with some of the world's poorest people.

Then on 25 September and 2 October, Mike French from the **Lutherans** will come and show us the tools we have to make a difference and to speak out and bring about change in society, to use our voice for the poor.

Please let me or Daphne know if you are coming so we can prepare enough cake!

Because **the good news of Jesus is not just for our salvation, it is for the renewal of creation.**

And the **good news of Jesus is about creating one body that stands up for everyone within it.**

And the **good news of Jesus is about us working as one unity and speaking for the poor and oppressed so that blessings flow to everyone.**

Because that is the royal law spoken of in James: Love your neighbour – even in far-away countries – as you love yourself.