

BLESSED ARE THE POOR? by Laurie Green.

Published by SCM in paperback. 2017.

Introduction

The Crucial Question

What did Jesus really mean when he looked at his followers and announced ‘Blessed are you who are poor’? I have struggled for many years to understand just what he meant by that pronouncement and have never found any of the usual answers to be at all satisfying. Those of us who have been poor or lived with poor people for substantial parts of our lives or ministries are only too aware that the lives of the poor are blighted by lack of opportunity and exclusion. They live shorter lives and have distinctly poor prospects. How then can Jesus call such people blessed? It would appear that the Church through the centuries has found this particular teaching so profoundly unsettling that it has either assumed that Jesus did not mean what he said, that he was simply exaggerating for effect, or that he was putting a rather romantic gloss on the real situation that confronts the poor. But if Jesus did not quite mean what he said, why did he make a life for himself in their midst, why would he people his stories with outcasts, spend time healing those who were poor and destitute, and even die alongside them on a cross? All this is anything but exaggeration for effect! It was from this deep commitment that Jesus went on to suggest that the rich on the other hand have a very slim chance of entering the Kingdom of God – it would be easier for a camel to thread its way through the eye of a needle. When his first disciples heard this teaching, they were as aghast as we are and found it very hard to believe. Yet despite all the obvious pressures that there must have been on the early Christians to omit these teachings from the Gospel records, there they still stand as a challenging testimony to the mind of a Jesus who clearly saw things very differently from how we prefer to see them.

I had an important decision to make in 1970. I had just completed my preparatory studies in readiness for ordination. Those studies had taken me from London, England, across to New York and back to Canterbury, the originating diocese of the Church of England. Dean Sydney Evans had just interviewed me about where I might begin my ordained ministry and had sent me off with my new wife Vicki to visit a likely parish. So there we were, huddled in the back of a rather large saloon car being driven by the parish rector and surrounded by the other members of his parish staff. The rector was very keen to impress, and in many ways he had reason to be proud of his team's achievements. The parish church was extraordinarily large, and he proudly boasted that they nearly filled it with willing members every Sunday. He was now driving us around the rather prosperous neighbourhood and chanced to look across to the right where stood houses of a distinctly lower quality than those we had so far viewed. He saw me looking more intently at them and, hoping to quell my fears, remarked: 'oh, that's our council housing estate. But don't worry, they don't ever bother us.' And on hearing that, my decision was made. I wanted to spend the rest of my ministry living in those areas which others like to ignore.

Vicki and I returned to Dean Evans to explain our concern, and immediately he wisely sent us to visit a very different sort of parish in Birmingham – at that time still the heavily industrialized 'second city' of England. Just before the Second World War Birmingham City Council had begun building what turned out to be at that time the largest expanse of publicly-built housing in the whole of Europe. And right at the heart of that enormous housing estate was the Parish of St Mark, Kingstanding, which was to become our home for the next four years. We've never looked back.

Some 30 years later a newly-ordained young man said to me:

When I first arrived in the housing estate where I was to minister, I was terrified. I had heard so many stories about the brutality and ugliness of the neighbourhood. I felt as if my hands

had been tied behind my back, and I was being thrown into the fiery furnace. But after being here three years I've come

to realize that the estate and its people have burnt away those fetters, and I have become free – freer than ever I would have been had I not had the redeeming experience of living here among them.

In saying such a thing it's easy to assume that he was being romantic about the poor. Was he living in the real world or just refusing to acknowledge the badly maintained housing, the dangerous street-life and the diabolical lack of amenities? For there is no getting away from the facts of life on one of today's council estates. They are often quite isolated places – even getting 'off' the estate to places of employment or to visit decent shops can be painfully difficult! The estates were often originally designed to make people stay put and look inward, in the hope that that would encourage tenants to bond with their neighbours and build community. But as with so many planning theories it had the opposite effect of cutting them off from the mainstream of the city's life. It also had the long-term effect of making those who do not live on the estate look upon those who do as an alien species. Naming the estate that you're from can often lose you a friend, or more frequently the chance of a good job, a loan or a decent school place. So why did that young man say that living and ministering on the estate amongst such problems and poverty had set him free? It is precisely to that question that this book is hoping to offer an answer. So let's now try to pose this book's question in another way.

I was born and bred in the East End of London – not at that time known for its affluence! My parents were cockney, working-class people, who had known what it was to be really poor. They had both come through times of horrendous unemployment, and my father once mentioned that he had seen our mother starve herself in order that we children should not go hungry. But they were tough people for tough times – in fact my mother was so tough that she is still going strong in her hundredth year! I was brought up in a very socialist climate by my family, especially by my Stalinist grand-mother, but I always

had the impression that my communist associates were being rather romantically-biased about the poor working class and their ability to set the world right. As a young man, I warmed to their

rhetoric, but in my heart I feared that if ever they took the reins of government the poor workers would fail just as badly as had the present ruling élite, or even, as in the Soviet Union, turn into a new élite themselves. But the question remained – what did some people think was so special about the poor that made my family believe that people like that could save the world? I read Karl Marx avidly in the hope of finding an answer and was fascinated to discover that Marx was in fact even more realistic about the degradations of the poor working class than even I was daring to be. In 1845 his close colleague Frederick Engels had published his study *The Condition of the Working Class in England* to show just how deprived and denigrated the poor had become. But despite that evidence Marx believed that there was still something about this left-out and abused proletariat that held the key to history. If only they would grasp it he argued, they had the power to change society. But I was still not convinced that it would necessarily be a change for the better.

As our family continued to debate how the plight of ordinary people could be relieved, I searched in every corner for an answer to my uncertainties. I even ventured into the local Church! And it was there that I heard my question framed in a way more stark and challenging than ever I could have imagined of such a conservative institution. It came at me right out of the pages of the Bible. Saint Luke is recounting the time when Jesus gave his masterly and authoritative sermon – the Beatitudes (Luke 6.20):

Then fixing his eyes on his disciples he said:

How blessed are you who are poor: the kingdom of God is yours.

So Jesus too was saying that the poor would inherit that better future for which we all yearned, but additionally he was declaring that even in their present condition they are blessed by God! Well, Jesus may have been saying that the poor are blessed, but they still

did not look in any way blessed to me! This idea seemed insane. Yet I could not dismiss him as another pious romantic for it was very clear from all that I was reading and hearing about Jesus that he had been living with the poor of Palestine all his life, so he

knew full well what poverty is and what it can do to people – how it can reduce and demean them; how it can isolate and de-skill them; how it can anger and even unhinge them – and still he was saying, given all his personal experience, that they are blessed!

All these years later I still struggle to know just what this saying of Jesus really does mean. And what's more, knowing the Church as I do, I am convinced that the Church at large needs to pay careful attention to this question if it is to become what it truly should be – the Christ-centred instrument of God's Kingdom, that his will might be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In the early months of 2011 I found myself confronted by more important decisions to make about my life. After 41 years of ordained ministry, it was time to retire and face the fresh challenges and opportunities that retirement would present. I wanted to devote what time remained to me to areas of interest which had been squeezed out by my daily round of responsibilities. There were three things in particular that I was looking forward to. First, I was strongly committed to a small charity, *Friends of the Poor in South India*, which I helped set up some years ago.¹ This interest takes me regularly to extremely poor areas of India, where I live with local Indian people who run the projects we support. This keeps me mindful of the intimacy of the global village in which we all now live and puts me in direct touch with some of the poorest people in the world. Second, I was pleased to continue as the Bishop Visitor to a convent of Anglican Benedictine nuns in West Malling in Kent,² where I meet regularly with the sisters to discuss their life of obedience and shared poverty. They are an enclosed order, devoting themselves absolutely to their relationship with Christ. Our conversations deepen my understanding of the value of the spiritual life and of the mysterious power of poverty and

simplicity. Third, I was concerned to continue my commitment to those who live and minister on the poorest housing estates of Britain, and this was possible by virtue of my long-held membership of NECN, the National Estate Churches

¹ www.fpsindia.btck.co.uk.

² www.mallingabbey.org.

Network³ – an ecumenical group of Christians who share my interest and concern for those very challenging areas. For many years, the Network had been a loose connection of friends, sharing regular newsletters and staging an annual gathering. But it had always lacked someone to travel the country, visiting its local groups in their own housing estate locations and gathering the stories of estate life and ministry today. So, by devoting a few days each month to journeying around the country I was given ample opportunity to listen to the poor on the housing estates as they shared their own experiences with me.

Through the first three years of retirement I therefore continued to visit India regularly, spent many hours deepening my understanding of convent life at the Abbey and visited hundreds of people on poor housing estates up and down the country. And throughout this time, the common thread of all this activity – the question of poverty and this so-called ‘blessedness of the poor’ – was never far from my mind. I therefore determined to commit myself to a proper study of the question which had been dogging me throughout my ministry and which, God willing, I was now being given time and opportunity to address. But exactly how I was going to go about this, I was not entirely sure. Of one thing I was certain, and that was that I did not want to treat the question of poverty or the poor as some sort of abstract mind-game, for the intensity of suffering which I saw in the faces of those who were at the mercy of poverty told me that to have integrity, my question had to be grounded in the experiences of the people who knew most about it – the poor themselves. So often I had noticed that many books and reports on poverty limited their research to a discussion of what various scholars and researchers had said about the poverty data, and the poor themselves had only after that been asked to detail the wretchedness of their condition or to

specify what help they needed. But I had always believed that the poor should be the subject of their own history, not merely the object of other peoples' discussion about them. I wanted to begin and end my work therefore in the company of the poor. This determination chimed in very well with the commitment I have

³ www.nationalestatechurches.org.

had for many years to what we now call ‘contextual theology’, where a thoroughly incarnational method of study begins from a rootedness with the people in the place where the theological issue comes most sharply into focus.

Second, it was for me very important that we should not shirk the obscene reality of this subject matter by adopting a romantic view of poverty. I’d noticed that when I spoke to groups about Indian poverty, there was a tendency amongst my hearers to adopt this romantic approach – as if the Indian poor were rather exotic and endearing. But this reaction was never evident in my audiences when I spoke of the poor nearer home, here in Britain. Every culture has devised ways of ignoring or even downing upon the poor in their midst whilst honouring the heroism of the poor who are far away. In India itself, the poor are often believed to be poor as a consequence of a badly lived former life, so they are themselves to blame, while here in the secular UK, we devise different arguments that allow us to arrive at a similar conclusion – that the poor are themselves to blame for their own poverty. I was keen therefore to concentrate upon the poverty that is near to home and to try to understand better the overlays of blame and antagonism that are rife in our culture.

Third, my discoveries about the recent history of poor housing estates in Britain was opening my eyes to a very concerning phenomenon which the sociologists are calling ‘residualization’. It turns out that for a whole raft of reasons which we will go into later, our poorest housing estates have become places where our most needy citizens are now being crowded in together in a way which amplifies and multiplies the suffering which poverty causes. The *Independent* newspaper has gone so far as to say that today

Britain’s estates are ‘social concentration camps’.⁴ Some have likened this situation to the multiple deprivation of the old Victorian slums and rookeries in that we are now seeing in

⁴ *The Independent*, Tuesday, 12 November 2013, stated: ‘In England and Wales, the average electoral ward is 16 per cent public housing, but in the poorest wards that figure rises to 70 per cent or more. Britain’s estates are social concentration camps.’

particular housing estates concentrations of poverty which have not been seen for generations.

Given these three concerns, it became clear to me that if I was going to understand why Jesus points us to the poor when he introduces the Kingdom, then it would be very instructive if I were to undertake my study alongside the people who live in Britain's poor housing estates. It would of course have been possible to focus upon rural poverty or the new poverty of the seaside towns and use those localities as case studies for a deeper understanding of poverty, but I have found that a concentration on social housing estate life sharpens the focus as no other perspective does. It remains one of the most challenging of all places in which to minister, it has none of the glitz and excitement of inner-city ministry to deflect our eye from the ball, and it is an area of life upon which a great deal of methodical and helpful sociological research has been recently centred. There is no doubt that intense poverty can be found in many hidden corners of Britain today, among the elderly, the infirm and the isolated, but on the poorest of our housing estates it is readily obvious, well-researched and for me, easily accessible.

I am not the first, of course, and I will certainly not be the last, to write a theological book about the poor, and even in recent months new publications are finding their way to our libraries and bookstores. But my grave concern is that those publications mostly continue to treat the poor only as opportunities for those who are not poor to do their good works. The fine American scholar Gary A. Anderson, for example, has entitled his recent book *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (2013), as if to say that the Bible deems the place of the poor only to be objects of the

generous charity of others. There are also brilliant studies of the poor which offer new and exciting ways by which we can bring the Gospel message to them, and others who major on how, by slimming down our consumption, we too can gain from the holiness of poverty. But while all these approaches have insights to offer, they remain somewhat limiting by treating the poor as the objects of our own interest rather than as the closest friends of Jesus. There are nevertheless theologians and practitioners who are currently thinking new things and wanting to start, as Jesus does, by being alongside and listening to what the poor

themselves have to teach us. I hope that this book will be in that new tradition, offering a radical theology which is based upon what we learn from the poor, so that we can all go forward together. Perhaps then we will all be better placed to understand and respond to the pronouncement of Jesus when he declares: 'Blessed are you who are poor.'

1

Blessed are the Poor?

A minister friend of mine who has lived on a very poor estate for some years describes his environment in the following way:

The estate has many open spaces and was clearly designed to be an above average place to live. However, rents were too high for many ordinary people, and so the situation developed whereby people on housing benefit tended to be moved in. The estate has become one of the dumping grounds of the Town. By one well-used statistical index it is the sixtieth most deprived area in England. Murders tend to be particularly violent, and quite a few are carried out by women. A recent arson attack saw a house completely destroyed, but fortunately the family were not injured. SRB [the Government's Single Regeneration Budget] funding has been a big help. The last beat manager had excellent results, but now one beat manager is responsible for the whole estate and another difficult patch together. While there was money for estate caretakers, they made a big difference. One local activist made an impact over 15 years, but she died a few months ago. The local CSV [Community Service Volunteers] have two part-time workers on the estate as a result of a successful lottery bid. That project has two years to run. The school achieves amazing results and employs many extremely dedicated staff. Many of the kids are poorly nourished and arrive hungry at school. They may not have a coat even for sub-zero conditions. A large percentage have to be self-reliant from an early age. Some even have parents who sell their kids' Ritalin prescriptions. A number born on the estate are never taken anywhere, even into the town centre.

There has been a small congregation on the estate for about 33 years. It has never had a church building and always worshipped in community facilities. One vicar stayed for about 20 years and was a bit like their mother. People who worship here tend to be very poorly educated with some almost on the special needs level, but one of those disabled worshippers has a faith to shame us all, and I am very grateful she is here. Another estate, local to us, boasts a churchwarden with Down's syndrome. A group of evangelists who are connected with the Church of England has started work with local women and are running an Alpha club for kids after school. They are in the process of applying for CCF [Church and Community Fund] money. We are still looking for a way to work together. It's Jesus or bust on this estate.

There is no romanticism or glamour in his description, and yet he would not choose to live or work anywhere else. He later explained to me that after many years of committed, embedded experience in this deprived estate, he has grown so much to love the people he meets every day that he believes in his heart that Jesus is right to say they are blessed, but he is at a loss to articulate quite why. He certainly senses that the Jesus he meets in the Gospels would feel very much at home with these people.

Poverty in Galilee

The Galilee of Jesus' day was not, relatively, a poor region – indeed it was considered by the Romans to be an economically wealthy province due to its very fertile plain, the agricultural skills of its people and its advances in food technology, not least in the fish processing industry. But this wealth was not evenly distributed. Herod Antipas, in order to support his huge building programme, was taxing at a rate of between 25 and 40 per cent of both income and produce, which forced farmers to grow less crops for local

consumption and produce instead crops which would raise a cash return. This left many local people hungry and drove many small farmers into debt, so that wealthy investors from abroad were easily able to buy out local farms. That meant that farm workers were now often labouring on land that they themselves had once

owned but which was now in the hands of absentee landlords. It was against this deeply felt sense of injustice that Jesus told such parables as that of the Vineyard Tenants and the Absent Landlord (Matt. 21.33–43). Likewise, while fishing on the Sea of Galilee had once been able to support lucrative family businesses like that of Zebedee and his sons (Mark 1.19–20), as a result of the eager competitiveness of the semi-globalization of the Roman Empire, the fish stocks were now being ruthlessly exploited and over-fished by foreign entrepreneurs using local day labourers. The fish were taken to the local factories in Magdala and other lakeside cities to manufacture salt-fish products, especially the Garum sauce which sold so well in Rome. Many Galilean fishermen were forced to sell up under such pressure and therefore had good reason to feel disaffected. As Jesus had occasion to observe, from the poor was taken what little they had, while the rich accrued even greater wealth (Luke 8.18).

Even from these few examples it becomes clear that many of Jesus' followers would therefore have been carrying the burden of significant poverty in relation to the comparative wealth of the region, their poverty resulting from the injustice and selfishness of the ruling wealthy elites. So when in Luke 6, Jesus 'lifts up his eyes towards them' (v. 20) to tell them how the poor are blessed, he would have been gazing on people who could see wealth all around them but knew the injustice of having their share of that wealth only recently wrenched from their grasp. It would not have been difficult for them to discern the connections between wealth, poverty and injustice. By comparing much of Jesus' teaching with what we now know about the socio-economic conditions prevailing at the time, it is plain to see that he had deep and intimate knowledge of some of the motors which were generating the poverty around him, and he had personal experience of what that poverty could do to those being trapped within it. We see shades

of this in his question to the crippled beggar who had lain by the Pool of Bethesda for 38 years. Here was a man who evidently could not afford assistance to help him into the health-giving waters. Before he heals him, Jesus asks him a telling question: 'Do you want to be healed?' (John 5.6) – Jesus was well aware that long-term destitution can make us apathetic and depressed, no longer able to take initiatives – even those which would be to our best advantage. Similarly, when four friends lower a

paralysed man into the crowded room where Jesus was teaching, he is aware of all the issues of dependency which surround the situation. He heals the man and tells him it is time to take his life into his own hands – ‘take up your bed and walk’ (Mark 2.9–12). Jesus knew that the man should no longer be dependent on those who had always carried him. He needed empowerment as well as freedom from the immediate problem of his disability. And we too will be learning from Jesus that poverty entails a great deal more than the disabling absence of cash.

What exactly is poverty?

In order to listen attentively to the voices of poor people themselves, first let us clear the ground of some misunderstandings about the term poverty. In today’s world, there is often a distinction made between ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ poverty – that is, the absolute poverty of those who are without the means of eking out even a bare existence and the relative poverty of those who do not starve but are without the means to play a full part in their own society. Some believe that there is no real poverty in Britain, because only absolute poverty is of real consequence. They claim that only in places like India will you find absolute poverty, and I know to my shame what it is to walk past beggars on the streets of Delhi who have had both hands removed, so that they might attract the generosity of alms-givers! Around the world a child dies of poverty every four seconds, and almost a third of the population of our planet’s population scrape a living on less than two dollars a day – the equivalent of about £1.20. But what

makes the dire poverty of those Indian beggars so inexcusable is the complex relationship which their poverty has with the extreme wealth of others in that country. That wealth interconnects with their destitution. In other words, even their poverty is relative in that if the inequalities of the country were addressed, their abject poverty would subside and what is described by some as ‘absolute’ poverty would at last be recognized as relative poverty at its most cruel.

Similarly, sociologists here in the West recognize that whilst Britain is also assuredly a rich nation, here also there is a disproportionate distribution of that wealth to such a degree that

many are unable to participate properly in society. At present five families in the United Kingdom together own more than the poorest fifth of the whole population. This leads us to realize that in fact all poverty is relative insofar as the wealth of the world is sufficient to support all its inhabitants if only it were shared justly. There is enough to fulfil everyone's need, but not to fulfil our greed. As we shall see, it becomes clear by studying the dynamics of poverty and wealth that poverty is more a measure of inequality than merely the absence of an income. We will see that this injustice was fully understood by Jesus when he observed it in Galilee, and it was this relational aspect of poverty which made it for him not only a matter of material concern but an affront to the justice which was essential to the Kingdom of God that he was inaugurating.

Social commentators have long talked of poverty as a dynamic and relational phenomenon. As far back as 1776 the economist Adam Smith argued that poverty is the inability to afford 'not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without' (Smith 1776). By 1979 Peter Townsend was expressing what, 200 years later, had become the consensus of western opinion that individuals 'can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong' (Townsend 1979, p. 31).

For all practical purposes therefore, we can say that because economic development has progressed through the years in the United Kingdom the problem at issue for us is not usually poverty in any absolute sense, although many cases of starvation and hypothermia do still come to light, but the constraining and debilitating effects of the inequality of opportunity, care and income which so contrasts with what the majority of our people would consider as basic and essential.

In recent years, the situation here in Britain has considerably worsened for the poor, because as our society has changed from a production-led economy into one where consumption dominates, those who do not have the wherewithal to engage fully in the consumer market because of lack of cash, find themselves becoming increasingly irrelevant to our consumer

society. In a consumer society, promises are made of more and more choices for its citizens, but those choices rely increasingly on a person's ability to purchase what's on offer. Similarly, in a consumer society even transport, education, health, housing and fuel are placed at the mercy of the market place, leaving the poor at a clear disadvantage, as they struggle more than most to find the money for basic essentials like prescription charges, heating and lighting, rent or the exorbitant interest charged by the credit companies who target the poor.

Calculating poverty

Once having realized that poverty is of this relational quality, governments have set about calculating where to draw the line between the poor and the non-poor. Here in Britain, this is usually done by calculating 60 per cent of the national average wage and counting those who fall below that marker as poor. In schools, we calculate that a child is in poverty if she or he has to be in receipt of free school meals for a period of more than six years. The weakness of a calculation of that sort is that when we talk about 'the poor' we fail to recognize that the reality is much more fluid, with families and individuals moving in and out of

poverty as their circumstances improve and worsen. So for a child to be below the poverty line for six consecutive years means that that child is very impoverished indeed! Others therefore prefer to calculate how much income a household would currently require in order to meet a 'low cost but acceptable' budget for a selection of household goods. Campaigns are now well-established arguing that in order to protect against unforeseen events, if we add a margin of 15 per cent to that 'low cost but acceptable' budget, we arrive at a figure we can call a 'living wage' –an income sufficient to keep a family from slipping back into poverty.⁵ It was as long ago as 1889 that Pope Leo XIII called for a similar calculation for what he called a 'just wage', justifying the calculation not simply on grounds of economic justice but on the basis of our shared humanity under

⁵ www.livingwage.org.uk.

God.⁶ But now all these years later, for the first time in recent British history we find that although government figures indicate an upturn in the overall wealth and average income of our population, half of those living in poverty live in families where there is paid employment. They are working hard but there is no justice in the amount they are paid. In other words, poverty is not just a problem for the poor but an indictment of us all.

We shall see evidence in this study that most of those in Britain who are poor enough to deserve welfare benefits are far too proud to claim them, which means that many are living even further below the calculated poverty line than statistics reveal. But it is also arguable that our system of welfare benefits and the way that system is administered is now unfit for purpose, and we also might ask if the benefits presently come anywhere near keeping beneficiaries above the poverty level. Given that the UK is still the fifth largest economy on earth the astronomical rise in the numbers having to turn to foodbanks for survival proves that something is sadly amiss.

One of the things that we will quickly learn from our study of the Gospels and from coming alongside and listening carefully to the voices of the poor is that this lack of income is actually only one element in a whole combination of factors which truly make a person poor. The stories which they will tell will be of exclusion, loss of motivation and personal pride, of being made to feel guilty and ashamed, as well as lack of access to services like education, employment and health care. Poverty is a syndrome encompassing many symptoms and born of many causes.

For all the reasons I have described in my Introduction to this book, if we are to gain deeper insights into what constitutes poverty and why on earth Jesus called the poor blessed, it is best to do as Jesus did and get alongside poor people and learn directly from their experience rather than merely juggle statistics and think abstractly. And in Britain a very obvious place for us to look and learn from the poor is on our poorer housing estates, or housing ‘schemes’, as the Scots prefer to call them, for it is here that we will find all these issues writ large.

⁶ Pope Leo XIII’s 1889 encyclical letter *Rerum novarum* is now widely regarded as the cornerstone of Catholic Social Teaching.

A distinctive shape

Housing estates are not like other urban areas and are very distinctive in many ways. To begin with, each estate is given its own name, either formally such as the Lansbury Estate in Poplar – named after its famous MP – or sometimes informally, such as the estate in Blackpool which the local police and social services have disparagingly tagged ‘Baked Bean Island’, since they assume that tenants there eat little else. Most estates are so distinctive that they are even easy to spot from the air. From that perspective it is very clear how different their formal planned design is from the urban sprawl of the suburbs or from the patchwork patterning of the inner city. The vast majority of our housing estates were actually designed to be different from, and often separate from, their surroundings. They are usually very well-defined areas in their own right, and any visitor walking the streets is easily able to tell when they have reached the edge of the estate, because the buildings will suddenly look very different; a main road may define its perimeter or perhaps the

visitor will abruptly be confronted by countryside or a factory estate. The Belhus Park Estate in Essex was designed, like so many, with only one road in and out in order, so the planners insisted, to encourage tenants to look inward and create an internally cohesive community, but as so often has been the case elsewhere, this ploy actually isolated and alienated the estate from its surrounding communities.

Lynsey Hanley in her book *The Estates* (2007) makes a telling observation. From her own experience of growing up on a Birmingham estate she explains how the built-in confinement of the place, the inward-looking design of the estate, becomes internalized in the very psyche of those dwelling there. The wall around the estate, she says, is projected into the mind as ‘a wall in the head’ beyond which no estate dweller feels they can trespass: life is limited, horizons lowered, skills down-played. Ever since Plato wrote in his *Republic* of the ways in which the environment in which we are set can enhance or inhibit our clarity of mind, we have been aware how the built environment can impact our sense of wellbeing. We all know how a walk along the sea shore can invigorate our bodies, calm our tensions

and lift our horizons, but Hanley underscores how the confining and sometimes brutalizing environment of some of our estates can do just the reverse. The ‘wall in the head’ can send us inward and drastically limit our expectations of life and of our selves.

On many of the older estates very tight and inward-looking family networks have grown up to compensate for that sense of isolation and vulnerability. And the need for such compensation is not an illusion. When set against the realities of severe loneliness or the dangers of violence, estate tenants very often do find themselves bereft of support and sanctuary, and it is for that reason that they build and value supportive networks, although unfortunately these can sometimes become negative subcultures resulting in aggressive tribalism and gang rivalry. Internal strife can also be the inadvertent result of the fact that so many homes of the same sort would have been built at the same time, so that people of the same generation all moved in simultaneously. This often led to strong relationships being established across the first

parenting generation, especially during the child-rearing years, as mothers and children got to know one another at the school gates. But it left a rather lop-sided demography with no older generation to help care for the children. Then, as the children grew up and left home, the remnant generation grew older, and new families moved in to fill the vacancies. These families had different social needs and generational expectations, so that antagonism arose between the ‘incomers’ and the original inhabitants. Sociologists call this destabilizing process ‘age-layering’, a phenomenon which results in a community of extreme fluctuations, where suddenly there appears to be an overwhelming number of young people with the schools unable to cope, and a short time thereafter the schools empty, their parents become older, and there is a dearth of amenities to suit the elderly. Tensions and antagonisms arise, and those families who have the means seek stability elsewhere, leaving the estate to increasing tension and volatility.

The physical and psychological ghetto I’ve described can be made worse if the estate has become dismal and unkempt – and for many estates the environment is drab in the extreme. Gipton, the first ‘garden suburb’ estate in England, was built in 1935 and was deliberately designed without any local amenities but provided with a sparkling new tramway, intended to transport estate tenants to shops and employment in the centre of Leeds. Everything they required was available at the other end of the

tram-ride. Through the course of years, however, the properties have been very poorly maintained, the roads allowed to decay, and the tram-tracks have been ripped out leaving a wide tract of dreary dual carriageway through the estate which divides the community in two – and no new internal amenities have been provided to compensate, as is the case in numerous estates across Britain. Modern weekly shopping patterns require a family car or for the amenities and supermarket to be located nearby, but many old estates boast meagre car ownership and minimal amenities. Such is Gipton, but even modern estates seem to suffer the same fate. In 2001 a Baptist minister friend began renting a house on a newly-built estate near Ashford – in the Thames Gateway regeneration area – and was told that shops

and amenities were on track to arrive soon after. Nine years later the promised amenities arrived, but consisted only of a smelly fast-food take-away and a hair dresser. Most estates, new and old alike, boast a small row of shops somewhere within the neighbourhood, but on many of the older estates these shops have long been boarded up or shuttered, and if they do open, you shop there at your peril. Only betting shops, cheap pound shops and credit loan shops seem to thrive – even the pubs now standing empty and desolate in their deserted car parks.

As if that were not enough this drabness is also a feature of many an estate church building. Some are quite pleasant but suffer from dilapidation or design faults while many others look like small grey concrete warehouses, made colder by broken-down heating installation, over-use of glass and substandard construction. Yet these worship spaces and halls are very often the only community spaces still functioning and available to the locals. Most remain down-at-heel and uninviting both inside and out but occasionally a purpose-built or upgraded church will stand as a beacon of hope for the community – the congregation offering a warm welcome and substantial help to tenants and to one another.

As we'll see, from time to time through the years there has been a concerted effort to design and build well-appointed estates which still feel inviting and settled. Others have benefited from considerable injections of funds through regeneration schemes or have passed from local council ownership into the hands of tenants, private landlords or housing associations. As we'll learn,

all this has made considerable impact upon the present scene and issued in a complex array of estates. But there remain, even where concerted efforts have been made, a very large number of estates where progress seems to have been minimal, and all too often the fabric, the environment and the standards of the health and education have fallen far below anything that can be called acceptable in a country as wealthy as Britain. This sorry state of affairs is largely the outcome of a history of conflicting housing policies and political decisions which were intended to have altogether different consequences from what actually transpired.

A distinctive history

Perhaps it all started when the landed gentry of the sixteenth century built occasional cottages on their estates to house their farm labourers and retainers. But this ‘estate housing’ moved to an altogether different level when the industrial revolution took hold. In 1776 Richard Arkwright built his second cotton mill in Cromford in Derbyshire, and to attract the 450 workers that he needed to operate the mill, he built in North Street the first row of industrial estate housing in the world. But as the Industrial Revolution went into overdrive vast numbers of workers were turned off the land, descended upon the towns and cities and made to live in the pitiful homes which less principled managers than Arkwright provided for their workers. Over time much of this accommodation was deemed to be so bad that government was forced to step in with its 1890 Housing of the Working Classes Act and as a consequence, in 1900 the Boundary Estate was opened in London’s Bethnal Green as arguably the first social housing scheme in the world to be built by a local government authority. The council housing estate as we know it had arrived.

The so-called Great War of 1914–18 forced the British government to acknowledge the miserable condition of the working class when a frightening percentage of volunteers for the trenches were found to be too sickly to sign on! Something had to be done about the disease-ridden slums from which they came. As the war dragged on, politicians such as Prime Minister Lloyd George promised the combatants that they would return to ‘homes fit for heroes’, but it was not until after the Second World

War that the building of Council Housing began in earnest. The newly-elected Labour Party began building quality housing at an unprecedented rate under the keen eye of Nye Bevan, and when Harold Macmillan was elected as the very first Minister for Housing, he built no less than 300,000 new homes every year. Slum housing was cleared as the 1960s saw modern and none too reliable methods of concrete construction used to erect towering new blocks of flats across the sky-lines and around the fringes of our cities. The two major political parties outdid one another in their promises to build new

homes and by 1979, no less than 42 per cent of the population of the British Isles were housed in council housing.

But when in that same year Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher swept to power, she announced radically different policies on all fronts. As part of her drive to privatize the country's assets she introduced a flag-ship policy for council housing which promised all tenants the 'Right to Buy' their council house outright on astoundingly beneficial terms. The scheme proved very popular, and it soon became possible to spot the privately-owned properties by their individuality and enhanced upkeep. As the years have elapsed, however, this same 'Right to Buy' scheme has produced unforeseen and very worrying consequences not least the devastating fall in the number of homes remaining in local authority hands. These have had to be let to those people in most need so that many council housing estates, which once housed a healthy mix of families have now become overwhelmed with very poor and needy tenants. Many an erstwhile diverse estate has become a sink estate for the unemployed and those at the very bottom of the economic ladder – a phenomenon referred to as 'residualization'.

When Tony Blair was elected as the Prime Minister of a New Labour government in 1997, his Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, like his Conservative predecessor Michael Heseltine, championed the regeneration of cities and towns using the new money which had become available as a result of the new competitiveness of globalization. Housing developers had a field-day, reaping heady profits by building vast estates of tiny houses and flats supported by very meagre infrastructure and few local amenities, but all stoked by banks offering ludicrously low-priced mortgages (Green & Baker 2008). This extraordinary availability of finance also funded a plethora of programmes designed to support the poor, and while that money lasted, great

strides were made. But in 2008 the bubble burst, when the banks and financiers were no longer able to maintain the charade of ever-available credit, and the resultant economic recession bit into the poor more than any other group in society. Promised plans for new projects and better amenities were shelved, supports and benefits were withdrawn, and a new wave of unemployment sent even more people into abject poverty.

So it is that the history of social housing estates in Britain is a tale of innovation to meet need, residualization of the most needy, regeneration in times of boom and destabilization of erstwhile secure communities. All this has served to escalate the traumas and uncertainties of an already poor and vulnerable population.

Distinctive people

Perhaps it is unemployment which currently most exacerbates the blight of the poor. In 1979 Britain boasted 7,000,000 manual workers employed in production industries, but by 2011 this had dropped to just 2,500,000, leaving vast swathes of working-class men and women unemployed. And with the demise of heavy industry, gone too were the unions which had for all their faults given a voice and a sense of community pride to the industrial workforce. When we consider how many of our housing estates were specifically built to house the manual workers of a local industry, we begin to appreciate what a devastating effect this about-turn in the economic order of our society had on those communities, with the relegation of a considerable number of them into very significant poverty.

Many housing estates are at the edges of our cities but there are many too that are to be found at their heart. In these centrally located estates, more recent years have witnessed the process of gentrification rapidly taking place with altogether different consequences. Many of the old council properties were by now in the hands of housing associations, and private landlords who upgraded their inner-city properties and increased rents, forcing the poor out and attracting in the upwardly mobile. This allowed aspiring middle-class workers to live close to the exciting city centres, where they could find office-based work and all the amenities the modern city affords. But the ousted poor had to go where they could.

In other old inner estates, many of those tenements which consisted of three- or four-bedroomed units were found to be well-suited to larger families from minority ethnic backgrounds. The

large East London estate of Shadwell Gardens for example is now almost totally Bangladeshi, while in South London many house African or Afro-Caribbean households. This is so very different from the huge majority of outer-lying social housing estates elsewhere in Britain, where a visitor may walk for miles without ever seeing a person of colour. In most of the poorer outer estates across the country, it is still the old white working class population which predominates, and you rarely come across a resident professional, save for the local vicar. And yet the one unifying factor across these estates despite the differences of ethnicity is the entrenched poverty.

Perhaps the worst conditions of all are to be found on those social housing estates which stand at an isolating distance from the city centres, for here tenants experience all the usual challenges of tough urban living – poor physical health, addictions, violence, gang culture, crime, mental ill-health, debt, poverty, ethnic tensions, and fear⁷ – while in addition they face the isolation more usually associated with the rural poor. And for some it is that isolation which makes all the other problems eventually unbearable.

Demonizing the poor

When I am asked to talk about contemporary housing estate life to groups who have never experienced it, I often challenge the audience to play a little game with me. I ask them to shout out any words that come immediately to their mind when I reveal the phrase that I have previously written on a large board. When I uncover the board they see the phrase ‘Housing Estate’, and on every occasion the audience has been embarrassed by its own response, involuntarily mouthing their unconscious associations – lazy, scroungers, lacking aspiration, obese, deprived. Rarely if ever comes a positive and complimentary word. The media repeatedly

⁷ See ‘Area-Based Poverty’, *Church Urban Fund Research Papers*, July 2011.

tell us that the poor are the authors of their own misery, and we have come to believe it.

Being diminished by poverty, no longer able to engage purposefully in our society because of unemployment, being hungry and reliant on foodbanks, housed in a vulnerable tenancy and with a drab environment for company – all this is bad enough for the poor, but added to these injuries is now the insult of being blamed for the poverty in which they find themselves trapped. ‘Everyone is out to crucify us here, vicar!’ observed one family whose combined wages were too low to sustain themselves without the assistance of state benefits and hand-outs. When you live on a council estate and are bombarded with insults of such intensity, it can play havoc with your self-image and interior peace, even if once you classed yourself as a reasonably robust personality. Even in casual conversation one hears blame regularly being heaped on the poor, and just recently I heard that at a local foodbank cat litter had been found in a donation of coffee.

How very different this demonizing portrayal of the poor is from that which we find in the Bible. Unlike our society, which labels the poor as loathsome and shameful, the Bible singles them out as God’s special ones (Matt. 25.39). The Psalms and the Hebrew prophets testify that those who do not care diligently for the poor and the widow are deserving of hell’s damnation (Psalm 14.4–6; Amos 8.6–7). Jesus spends his ministry at the service of the poor, taking every opportunity to be with them, to care for them and to make them his friends. And from that close encounter he is bold enough to say: ‘Blessed are you who are Poor’. What greater challenge could there be to the way our society is treating those who now live on our poorer housing estates?

The Church’s response?

The Church has found herself extraordinarily blessed by the ministry of countless numbers of people through the years who have given their lives in serving alongside the poor on the housing estates of Britain. But more recently many of the denominational

churches have withdrawn their support from the estates deeming estate congregations financially non-viable. The influx of young

cross-denominational groups has sometimes proved to be a great bonus whilst the Church of England, remaining true to its parochial tradition, still seeks to support a congregation in every area of the country, including the poorest estates. But all find it increasingly difficult. Some experienced ordained ministers clearly have more know-how and insight about housing estate life than any other professionals on the block, having lived and breathed it for so many years. Most are now alert to empowerment styles of leadership, encouraging laity to take the initiative in local community projects and to play significant roles in worship. Many congregations are finding that as government funding is withdrawn from local services and amenities, employees of these agencies are now queuing up at the door of the local church asking to work in partnership in new and creative ways. It is clearly due to the commitment of the Christian Church that thousands of hungry people are now being fed from foodbanks across the country. Churches and church halls open their doors through the winter months to give shelter to the homeless, and no less that 22 per cent of Church of England congregations are sponsoring debt-counselling courses, and a fifth are supporting a local credit union.⁸ Even larger numbers of congregations are keen to learn about poverty, its causes and its effects, and superb courses of study are being offered, not least that recently designed for Christians in the Rochester Anglican Diocese as their Lenten study for 2015 (Rochester 2015). For all these reasons many housing estate congregations are beginning to appreciate their own significance much more, both as an enduring, faithful presence and also as major players in the life of their community. And in harmony with this new engagement, fresh approaches to liturgy are being developed and new spiritual, biblical and theological insights spawned. Against all the odds there is a new spirit of excitement and purpose in some congregations, even in the most run-down poor estates.

However, despite all this, it has to be acknowledged that the wider Church is mostly not yet up to speed with this new learning and experience in its midst. It is often still treating housing estate ministry as a peripheral after-thought. Evidence of this can be seen for example in the style and quality of the resources that it makes available to its estate churches. I have recently been taking

⁸ www.cuf.org.uk/advent.

time to visit many congregations and their leaders across the country, and I invariably ask them to recommend any Church-produced resources which they have found apposite for use amongst their estate congregations. Not once have I had a thoroughly positive response. ‘We always have to change or re-work the resources that are offered to make them appropriate for our sort of people’, comes the answer. Many valiant local clergy and estate groups have devised their own materials and have allowed the wider church to disseminate them, but really good resources are few and far between. Those that are good are usually produced by groups that are marginal to the mainstream, such as CURBS,⁹ who produce wonderful materials for work with poor children, and UNLOCK,¹⁰ whose biblical study resources are designed for those ‘who can read but choose not to’. Likewise, church planting and church growth courses are available through the mainstream churches but much more advanced and sophisticated programmes, more attuned to housing estate experience, are more likely to be offered by the cross-denominational groups who have much deeper and longer-term experience of these things.¹¹ The underlying cause of this mismatch seems to be simply that of class for although the British have great difficulty understanding or defining what class is, nevertheless it is not at all difficult to see the disparity between the poor people of our estate churches and those who run and equip our denominations and how that issues in such grave misunderstandings and mismatches. This is a contentious issue to which we must later return. It does mean, however, that even if church leaders are personally committed to

the poor, for cultural and class reasons it may be very difficult indeed for them to know what to do about it. This is why Pope Francis has asked in his very first Exhortation to the faithful, that we move not only towards becoming a church *for* the poor, but a church *of* the poor. He writes, ‘I want a Church that is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us.’ (Pope Francis 2013, 198). By including the poor, listening to them and learning from them, the Church will be able to tread the path of Jesus who

⁹ www.curbsproject.org.uk.

¹⁰ www.unlock-urban.org.uk.

¹¹ See for example www.innerchange.org and <http://eden-network.org/>.

himself made the poor his constant companions. Only then may we begin to understand why Jesus calls the poor blessed.

Listening to those at the edge

When we turn to the Bible, we find that it regularly tells us that it is the poor who will hold the key to our salvation. I continue to be fascinated and intrigued by a biblical story which is to be found in the second book of Kings, chapter 7. The scene is the city of Samaria, now under siege by the Syrian Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram. Elisha the prophet is concerned for the city's wellbeing, since it is said that its starving inhabitants are killing their own children for food! We learn that at the gate of the city there are four lepers, struck by such virulent skin disease that they are outcaste from their own community. Being already on the edge of their society they debate amongst themselves whether they might try one last time to gain access to their city or whether they might wander into the camp of the besieging army to try their luck there. They know that they have nothing to lose, and because they are literally at death's door, they decide that they will risk all and see if the besieging army will offer them help. So they leave the specious safety of their own city gates and venture into the unknown – into the camp of King Ben-Hadad. But there they are confronted by a miracle. God had deluded the besieging army into thinking that the Egyptians had surrounded them, and so they had fled in the night, leaving the camp strewn with the wealth of all their belongings. The lepers are overjoyed and begin to loot the camp tent by tent. They eat and drink the fare and hide the booty. But

then they are struck by remorse and say to one another: 'We are doing wrong. This is a day of good news, yet we are holding our tongues!' (v. 9). So they return and take the news of freedom back to the city. But the King is reluctant to receive the news, assuming it to be a ploy to entice the citizens out into the open. Eventually, however, it is discovered that these lepers from the very edge of society are indeed the carriers of the good news that will save the city, and the whole people stream out from the city to eat the food left by the retreating besiegers, leaving the King to wonder how it could possibly be that good news could come from ostracized

lepers who had always been relegated to the very margins of society.

I find it illuminating to compare this ancient story with the teachings and actions of Jesus who time and again takes someone from the margins and places them in the centre telling his followers to learn the good news from them. In Mark 3.3 Jesus says to the sick man whose hand he is to cure: ‘Get up and stand in the middle!’ From the edge of the crowd he calls a little child: ‘whom he set among them’, and tells them to change and become like this child. He places a Samaritan at the centre of his story and an adulterous woman in the middle of the room. Just like the lepers of the story of the besieged city, these marginal people are the means by which the light dawns. Constantly, Jesus moves among those who are outcasts and at the edge of society in order to proclaim the Good News to the whole nation and inaugurate the Kingdom of God.

In the past, scholars assumed that Jesus spent so much time in the country villages rather than in the cities, because he preferred rural to urban living. Clearly, those early commentators had not been aware that the Galilee of Jesus’ day was one of the most densely populated and urbanized regions of the Roman Empire. Overmann assures us that ‘one could not live in any village of lower Galilee and escape the effects and ramifications of urbanization’ (Green 2003, p. 21). These villages, often called ‘cities’ by the New Testament writers, were administratively connected to the powerful urban centres even though they were seen by the city élites as inferior, dependent and marginal. I am drawn to see many similarities between the villages of Jesus’ Galilee and the

poor outer estates of today – for like our estates those Galilean villages were struggling with the harsh challenges of life on the edge, prowled around by rival gangs and groups, pressured by the authorities, harangued by the politicians, beset by poverty and need, longing for a new tomorrow. This is the context within which Jesus operated and is the vivid backdrop to many of his stories and parables. And it was from this village base, on the margins, that Jesus then ‘resolutely turned his face towards Jerusalem’ (Luke 9.51), in order to confront there the heart of the matter – to bring the Good News from the peripheral and forgotten areas to the very centre of power in order to inaugurate a new beginning for humanity. It is within the context of the poor that Jesus frames his teaching about the Kingdom, and with them

at his side, he brings it to bear upon the misshapen values of his contemporary culture. And in this way it is the poor who become the blessed vehicles of the Gospel of his Kingdom.

If the Church of today can, like its master, live with the poor, learn from being among them, and bring their Good News to the centre of its own life, then a new day will have dawned, and it will be a sign of that same possibility for our whole society. As individuals too we will then have opportunity to respond in a way that has integrity in the light of what we learn together. Pope Francis and the Archbishop of Canterbury are both urging us all to do just this, but I fancy that the Church at large will be alarmed at just how much change this will demand at the very heart of its culture. So it is imperative that we learn what Jesus meant when he told us to look to the blessedness of the poor as a key to his Kingdom. And for the British Church the poor social housing estates are a good place to start on this journey of listening, learning and transformation.