

An Examination of the Biblical Dialogue on Poverty and the Poor

Rev. Dr. Manya Wandefu Stephen

Alupe University College, Kenya

Abstract: - Poverty and presentations of such situations have been differently and at times adversely exegeted; bringing into question the biblical hermeneutics that Christians the world over subscribe to. The many interpretations have brought out varied perception and attitudes within the Christendom. Christians and none Christians alike of different persuasions; including socialists, anthropologists, economists, psychologists and most of all theologians, have come up with several convictions to the question, 'why poverty?' However, one may wonder, what the bible and bible traditions have to say about poverty. This paper carefully examines the biblical dialogue on poverty. poverty - difficult to define. To me, these are just but different shades of expression of the same concept. They are but lines that people draw concerning wanting situations that the poor people find themselves in.

Key terms: - Poor, The poor, Interpretation, Religion, Christian faith, Hermeneutics

I. INTRODUCTION

At the heartbeat of God are the poor; He speaks passionately about them. In fact the inaugural speech of Jesus in the famous Jerusalem synagogue had the poor featuring prominently; the physically and spiritually poor as well. It seems to me that what God is saying is that poverty is by no means a curse, though it may occur as the curse aftermath. As such the poor should not necessarily be perceived as a cursed lot, as some have alleged before. On many occasions the poor have been the invisible part of our community; the forgotten ones, those whose presence excites no one, they are of no use except to be called upon for wage earning, which in some cases they don't enjoy altogether. They are therefore disadvantaged and suffering, they carry the pain of the world. God is however the God of the poor and hence he hears their cry, instructs the church to attend to their needs, and that He blesses those who love and attend to their cause (Ex 3: 9).

In the Holy Scriptures, God has spoken to us in many ways about the poor and poverty. God provides a clear identification of who they are, their needs and the cure for such needs. Our attitudes as the neighbours and those who interact with the poor is spelt out and above everything else what God thinks about the poor and poverty is outlined. It must be remembered that poor are God's creation and are as important to him as the rest of the creation. Although we often forget about injustice and the suffering that emanates from poverty, it is evident from the bible that the poor are always in God's mind.

II. GOD AND THE POOR IN THE BIBLE

The bible speaks of God's concern for people; based on the creation narratives we see how God provided all that humans needed in the blessed Garden of Eden. Even though humanity strayed from God, He did not throw them away to the dogs as many would imagine; to the contrary, God covered their nakedness and provided for their needs wherever He had sent them. I to a high degree assume that God must have killed one of those beautiful animals to get a skin for these sinners. Thus one of the creations must have lost life for these first humans to enjoy the clothing. I can for sure conclude that, an animal had to die to ensure the physical shame humans suffered was covered (Genesis 3:21). This the extent to which God can go; ensuring that though a sinner a person is not left poor in his sin. An animal is sacrificed for the restoration of this sinning man! The one that knew no cloth now has one more item added to his possession- cloth, he is rich!

It is not clear though whether the killing of an animal is a precursor of a greater thing God is planning for the fallen humans who are now exposed to spiritual poverty. Could it be that this initial shedding of the blood by God became an example to Levitical and priestly sacrifices that followed! It is an act of grace to this poor man?

III. GOD'S EAR FOR THE POOR AND CONCERN FOR POVERTY

In one of those prophecies about the poor, Isaiah 41:17 speaks of how the poor and the oppressed look for comfort and food without success and how they are troubled. In this prophecy Isaiah says: "I, the Lord, will answer them Myself". The Lord promises to respond to the cries of the afflicted and those who lack. Most importantly He promises personal attendance; He will do it Himself, He goes ahead to assure them of His presence. In my understanding therefore, God's ear is attending to the concern and cries of the poor; He is ready and willing to attend to their cries. Though Jonah may not have been poor, but he presents an ideal for the ear of God. Jonah called to God from the belly of the fish deep in the sea and the Lord heard his cry. God can respond to our cry regardless of our condition and location for He is not limited like humans. When the children of Israel were thirsty in the desert they cried to God and He responded by providing water from a rock. In general God loved the poor world to the extent that He sent His own son to rescue them from bondage. It is argued that no-one out-gives God, whatever one has, they

were given by God; thus we are poor He is rich. Looking at this therefore, all we have is God's because all riches belong to Him. We too are His riches! By way of giving His son God is removing humanity and replacing it with His eternal rich. Here are some of the scriptures that directly articulate God's concern for the poor;

'Ps. 140:12. "I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and justice for the poor"; Is. 25:4. "For you have been a defense for the helpless, a defense for the needy in his distress"; Luke 4:16-21, 'And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read... "The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He appointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the LORD... Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'; Luke 6:20-21. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh"; James 2:5. "Did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?"

In the mind of God, everyone is equal poor or rich unlike human beings who's perception and attitude stilt based on the prevailing context, intrinsic and or extrinsic. He is not like humans who despise, avoid, neglect the poor, and give them negative labels. To many, the poor are lazy and unworthy of anything good and if they should have anything from us it should be that which we do not need. I have witnessed in churches where old clothes are requested from the congregation so that the poor may be given. It seems to me therefore that these poor people are regarded and classified as second class citizens. They only deserve second hand life. However in God's emotions the poor have a place, He sent His only son to come and die for them. Neediness, suffering and affliction arouse God's compassion and He takes action.

IV. GOD'S MIND ON THE POOR NEEDY

One of the concepts we shouldn't forget is that sin causes poverty, thus to cure poverty repentance and forgiveness of sin is required. God has provided for this situation by the provision of His son. John 3:16 says, "For God So loved the world that he gave his begotten son". God demonstrates His love by taking action to address the needs of His people. When He saw the sin of human kind and that it would lead to death, He sent His own son to save the world. The nature of God is to compassionately address the difficult situation and conditions His people often find themselves in for He desires that they live in peace and comfort. In line with His nature He commands the church/His people to demonstrate His love by serving the poor. These instructions on service to poor are covered in the Torah, the Gospels and in the Epistles. In other words, the bible is clear about how the church should treat the

poor. God's instruction to mankind and the church is to support the poor and to be just in the way they treat them.

Speaking to the children of Israel, Moses cautions them against being unresponsive to the needs of the poor. He says that God's word to His people is that they should not ignore those in their midst who are disadvantaged or needy whether kinsmen or strangers. God's command is that we should "generously lend him [the poor] sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks" (Deut 15:7). Taking care of the needy and the stranger is a standing instruction from God from when we encounter the children of Israel to the time of Jesus Christ and the apostles. God told the children of Israel to set aside the tithe and give it to the Levite, the stranger, the widow and the orphan so that they may "eat and be satisfied" (Deut 26:12). To the Israelite farmers, God instructed them to provide to the poor by allowing them to glean from their vineyard so that they may have enough for themselves (Lev 19:19ff). God also instructs us to speak on behalf of the poor. Myers (2011) says the poor are voiceless and hence their voice cannot be heard or listened to by the society. It is for this reason that God instructed leaders (and today the church) to speak out on behalf of the poor. Proverbs 31:8 tells us "Open your mouth for the dumb, for the rights of all the unfortunate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the afflicted and needy". Every society has its systems that guide its operations but most time they do not favour the poor; instead they serve the powerful. The distribution of resources and provision of services tend to give priority to the areas where much more can be gotten but not where there are nil returns. For example, the semi-arid and arid regions of Kenya until recently used to have very little infrastructure. The government did not pay serious attention to them because the economic returns from there would be very minimal compared to the high potential regions like the highlands and the rift valley. In the same regions there weren't many enlightened people in government who could speak for their communities. Because of lack of a voice that would strongly mobilize the communities in these areas to speak together they suffered a 'developmental lag' for a long time because they were marginalized. It is for such marginalized people God expects us to stand up for and ensure justice is done and their rights are respected.

Prophets in the Old Testament challenged social structures that marginalized people and advocated for a society where all had sufficient opportunity and endowment to reach and retain equality with one another. The OT law was for the redistribution of wealth rather than hoarding it, as it was intended to benefit all. God's compassion that released the children of Israel from the slavery of Egypt was to be expressed by extending the same compassion to the impoverished as a witness that God's mercy transforms all equally. Thus, the criticism of social injustice was aimed at more than correcting social wrongs; it also called people to repentance for the purpose of restoration to God. It was a call intended to bring people back to their ruler (Wall, 2003). The prophet's message of release is extended to the gospels which

present Jesus' messianic message as one of jubilee, that is, release of people from their bondage and oppression (Lk 4:18). Wall (2003) says that, Jesus' ministry is God's expression of mercy which through Christ is the fulfilment of God's "promise of salvation and consequently ushers in church's mercy, which bears witness to God's triumph of over evil and its various social and economic manifestations in the world". He links the work of the prophets to the ministry of Jesus Christ which founded the church mandated to continue with same mission of mercy to release people from their sin and reconcile them to God (2Cor 5: 19-21).

God's message to His people concerning the poor dominates the scripture: it is in the Torah, in the Prophets, the Psalms, in the Gospel and the Epistles, but the question is whether it dominates the church today. It is so clearly presented that if the church reads the Bible it cannot miss seeing or hearing it. The instruction is for the church to respond to the cry of the poor, not only when the church has a lot, or when the poor are of the same tribe/race, or when it feels good to do it or there are items that members of the church do not need and have to dispose of them. God is the God of the poor, He identifies with them, puts Himself in their place and always provides a way through which they get their bread. The bible confirms this by saying that he who shows kindness to the poor lends to the Lord and he will repay him for his good deed (Prov. 19:17).

God rewards those who are kind to the poor. He calls upon the church to take care of the poor and promises His blessings on those who serve them. When Jesus talked on hospitality he had this to say:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, lest they also invite you in return, and repayment come to you. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Lk 14:12-14).

God is pleased by those who generously give to the poor and promises to bless their work and undertakings. Similarly, to those who give food to the hungry and those who satisfy the needs of the afflicted, He promises to brighten their day, guide them, make them be like a spring of water which never dries up, and give strength to their bones (Isa 58:10). In Luke 12:33 Jesus says,

"Sell your possessions and give alms; make yourselves purses which do not wear out, an unfailling treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near, nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Jesus equates using our resources to meet the needs of the poor to preparing a valuable, inexhaustible and secure treasure in heaven. It is an account that cannot run out, be accessed by

destroyers or be corrupted. There is a big reward for those who forego their comfort to share what they have with the disadvantaged and the suffering. God not only promises to repay them, he also says what they spend on the poor becomes like a fathomless and bottomless inexhaustible mine for them stored and secured by God in heaven. People's minds always focus on where their earthly treasure is kept in order to safeguard it from plunder and also organize how it can grow. The heavenly treasure that Jesus is speaking about is created when we give to the poor and the more we give the greater it grows. Luke 6:38 says, "Give and it shall be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you". The measure we use is the same that will be used for us. If we give generously we shall also be given in the same manner. The bible tells us to give and it shall be given to us in an overflowing measure even running over. God's economy is one of giving.

V. THE POOR WILL BE/ARE ALWAYS WITH US

One time when Jesus was having dinner in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came and anointed him with costly ointment. The act did not please the disciples as they saw it as a wasteful way of spending money when there were many needy people. But, Jesus interpreted the woman's act differently. He saw it as an act of worship before his death. He tells the disciples that unlike him, they will always have the poor with them. In his statement Jesus seems to be telling them that, being his disciples, they know the people who are usually around and with them, and to those they need to focus their attention. Having been with him all along, he is telling them that they know His priorities. Since they know who comes first in the kingdom of God, they will have to be near the poor and have an opportunity to share with them. This is in line with God's words to the Israelites "since there will never cease to be some in need on earth, open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land" (Deut 15:11). Jesus' assumption is that the ministry and the social location of his followers will always put them close to the poor and hence reach out to them. The message Jesus is conveying to the disciples, therefore, is that their extravagance in worship should not prevent them from being generous to the poor who will always be at their side.

The text can, however, easily be used as an excuse for addressing poverty. The question would be, why bother about the poor since they will always be there? Wallis (2005) says that the, "critical difference between Jesus's disciples and a middle-class church is this: our lack of proximity to the poor". He feels that the church today does not find it natural to be close to the poor. His view is that the middle-class church or the wealthy Christians only talk about the poor but have no poor friends. So they merely hypothesize the reasons for their poverty and most times blame poverty on the poor people. Because of the social distance between the poor nations and the people from developed countries, this scripture is misused

to justify the rich nations not engaging comprehensively with poor populations in distant lands. Wallis presents an experience with fellow seminarians, on how they combed the Bible looking for information on the poor and God's response to injustice. They found that the theme is the second most prominent after idolatry in the Old Testament and it is equally elevated in the New Testament. After this discovery they also realized that they had not heard many messages on the subject from the pulpits of the churches they had grown up in. They were astounded and commended that "In the Bible the poor were everywhere; yet the subject was not to be found in our churches" (Wallis 2005).

Their exploration of the scripture exposed them to different scriptures that refer to the poor. In Amos they found "let justice role down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" and in Isaiah God says "*Is not this the fast I choose: to lose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, and let the oppressed go free?*" In Micah they found God says "*do justice, love, kindness and walk humbly with your God*" while from the Hebrew prophets they found out how the nations, rulers, and the rest of us are to treat the poor. Leviticus presents the periodic levelling of the society where slaves are to be released, debts forgiven, and land redistributed to its rightful owners. In the Psalms, God is the defender and liberator of the oppressed.

This group of seminarians found that in the New Testament God chose a peasant woman to be the mother of the messiah and she prophesied the meaning of the coming Jesus by saying: "*He has brought down the powerful from their throne, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away*". Wallis (2005) says, Mary does not speak like religious grant provider, a relief agency or an African politician with resources to provide to the needy, but instead she is like a social revolutionary who desires the poor to have a voice and take their position in society.

Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth which announced his ministry as the proclamation of the good news to the poor, release of captives and recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed and proclamation of the year of the Lord is a confirmation of his compassion for the poor and an affirmation that he had come to relieve them from bondage. The Sermon on the Mount is a paradigm shift in that it brings a new order in society that, the kingdom of God is for the poor, the meek, the merciful, peacemakers, the persecuted, and those who are hungry and thirsty for justice. The economic sharing of the early church after the descending of the Holy Spirit is a challenge to the churches today, particularly the assertion that there was not a needy person in their midst. The Bible says they sold their belongings and brought the proceeds to the apostles who shared them out according to ones need. It is interesting to imagine a community with an egalitarian way of meeting its member's needs. Their approach to life was one that promoted justice for they had all things in common. This presents an

unprecedented and unique love that seems to have existed in the first believers in Christ and not found in any other in the history of the church. All we can ask is; where is the church of Acts 4:32-33? The early church was one that demonstrated God's love by ensuring that it met the needs of all in its midst and lived its faith practically in response to the scripture "faith without works is dead" (Jas 2:14-18).

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion of all these, it must be understood that the heart of God is with the poor. Not because of anything that any of us may think but because they carry His image and likeness. Therefore just like all of us deserve the treatment befitting humanity so do they. They require access to food, housing and clothing; basic needs as is, for every other human being. Despite the reason that may have sent them to this deplorable situation it remains that humanity must be taken care of. And this is the whole essence of Christianity.

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AUTHOR

Rev. Dr. Manya Stephen is an experienced lecturer of religion. He has lectured in a number of universities and colleges including; Alupe University college (Where he is currently based), Kenyatta University, Daystar University, Scott Christian University, Mt. Kenya University and Riara University. In this paper Dr. Manya Stephen's reflections are based on the biblical/Christian debate currently on poverty.