

Theological reflection on inequality

Oxfam recently hit the headlines with a report on inequality, how it's growing and how it's a bad thing. They said for example..

'Extreme inequality corrupts politics, hinders growth and stifles social mobility. It fuels crime and even violent conflict. It squanders talent, thwarts potential and undermines the foundations of society.' (late 2014)

And they are not the only ones to be commenting..

Christian Aid says, with confidence, that

'Inequality is the main block to rooting out poverty from the world'. (*Partnership for Change*, p.11)

The Pope said to a group of business leaders gathered in Milan only last month, 'the root of all evil is inequality..'

And Will Hutton writing in the Observer in January, referred to 'the cancer of inequality'. It makes trust evaporate. It erodes a sense of common purpose. Interaction between increasingly separated and 'unequal' communities becomes more difficult. Inequality is not just about the figures, but about the sense of 'unfairness', resentment and distrust that this creates.

And inequality reveals to us that poverty is as much relative as it is absolute. Those who are poor are not simply those who live on less than \$1.25 a day, or whatever amount you want to name, but those who live on less than *others*. The scandal of poverty is not just that some people don't have enough, but they don't have 'as much' as others, and that a small number of others have way much more than enough..

But inequality, the more you think about it, is not a simple notion. Do we mean inequality of opportunity, or inequality of outcome? Does it really matter that a few people have way more than most – particularly if, as some argue, the situation that enables a few to be mega-rich might be the very situation that enables most people to *escape* poverty? Is a little inequality actually necessary to incentivise us..? Isn't it just a fact of life? Would it only be 'wrong' if we can show that it produces bad effects? (like violence and lack of trust, or even increased economic poverty), or is it wrong somehow 'in itself'? And what does the Christian faith say about inequality or equality?

The other day I overheard a conversation – one person was asking another whether they could think of any good quotes from Jesus about equality, and the reply came back that actually John Wesley would be a much better bet..

And of course, looking at the Gospels, you don't find the kind of statements that we might think we want – about more abstract notions like equality or justice – there are no perfect sound-bites. And that's partly because an idea like equality has often been shaped by much later discourses. Jesus predates the French revolution or the American constitution...

We need to remember that any abstract notion of the equality of all people would have been almost completely unknown in the world which Jesus inhabited. His was a very different world from the world we live in now – where equality is taken to be a good thing (even if it's not much examined). Jesus inhabited a world in which children were little valued, in which people of different status had very different lives, and even different kinds of deaths, a world in which it was taken for granted that some people were of higher status than others, and in which few imagined anything else (this is what makes that amazing statement of Paul's in Galatians 3 about there being no more 'slave or free, Jew or Greek, male or female' so astonishing...) It was also a world where there were radical inequalities, but such inequalities were often 'explained', even justified. The rich are rich because of blessing from God. The sick are being punished for their own sins or perhaps for the sin of their parents. There is an assumption, in many places, that the differences between people that we would judge to be simply unjust inequalities are explicable and not scandalous at all. If someone challenged the system as it then was, what they would do would be to say that a different system of inequality would replace the old one, in a kind of reversal. And in fact there is something of this in Jesus' teaching itself...the last shall be first..

Jesus didn't produce teaching that sounds like a UN statement or a Christian Aid policy statement. His teaching tends to be much more personal, contextual, narrative and it places us not in the position of critiquing a theory but in examining our own lives. Into such a context Jesus told the story we know as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. And I want to spend some time thinking about this story and its impact on us. It's a story which sets before us as starkly as anything could, the reality of one kind of inequality.

Luke 16:19-31

The story describes a rich man. He is dressed in the very best clothes – the couture for men of his day, Calvin Klein underpants and an Armani suit... And he feasts – not just on high days and holidays, but every day. The markers of wealth change little do they? Clothes and food. No doubt if he could have had a car it would have been new, smart and fast. And then the story describes a poor man, whose body is adorned only with sores, who is hungry and who would have welcomed even crumbs from the table, even the bread that rich diners might have used as napkins and then thrown on the floor or out of the window. He does

not lick his fingers as those at a feast, but instead the dogs come and lick his sores. Perhaps this is simply a sign of his complete degradation, that he is too hungry and weak to stop the dogs licking him.

It's interesting what the story *doesn't* say at this point. It doesn't tell us what kind of people these men are – *nothing* about their morality or their piety. The rich man might have been, for all we know, a great philanthropist. He might have been providing work for thousands of people. He might be a patron of the arts and a person of culture and learning. He might be generous in paying taxes and giving to charity. We don't know. We might conclude, with disapproval, that he doesn't fast, since he feasts every day. But all we really know is that he is rich. We do not even know his name. Neither do we know what the poor man's story is. We don't know what has brought him to poverty. Did he get into debt and fail to pay the rent on his tenant farm? Has he been the victim of crime? Has he spent all his money in profligate living? Is he suffering from some kind of physical or mental illness? Is he a religious person? Is he a kind person? We do not know. We only know that he is poor – and that he is called Lazarus. The story presents us simply with a vivid picture of inequality.

And these two people, though a great gulf of a kind separates them, are in relatively close proximity. There can be no question of them not knowing of the existence of the other. The poor man longs for the scraps from the table. And, as we learn later in the story, the rich man knows Lazarus' name – which perhaps explains why we need to know it (at the level of the story). The main thing to notice about these two people is simply that they are very different; whether or not anyone thought at the time or thinks now that they might have 'inherent' worth, their actual lives are radically different and they are at the extremes of inequality.

Next we learn that the poor man has died. The rich man also dies – and we hear that he is buried. Even here there is an implied difference – the rich man has a funeral, burial rites. The poor man doesn't.

But in death their positions are reversed. They are not 'made equal' in death, but rather their inequality is reversed. The rich man now must 'look up'. And it is the rich man who longs for something – not crumbs from the table, but some drops of water to quench his thirst. He calls out to 'Father Abraham' and asks him to send Lazarus to cool his tongue. But Abraham replies that he should remember that during his life he received his good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted while the rich man is in agony. AND he says that there is now a great gap fixed between them which cannot be crossed.

There are several important things to notice here. The rich man treats Lazarus as though he is his servant – he wants him to quench his thirst – and asks Abraham to order him to – he still thinks he has some kind of power. Abraham refers to good things and bad things as being 'received' – not earned, but simply given. As these things are not 'deserved' they are

thus reversed.. And the great chasm is now described as uncrossable - does this imply that the previous gulf between them might have been reversible, if only the rich man had thought of it or had not refused to cross it..?

The rich man continues to plead, but this time he asks that Lazarus should go and visit his five brothers and warn *them*, so that they don't need to suffer likewise. And he accepts that they need to repent to escape what he is now suffering. From what we know in the story we can only conclude that what they need to repent from is their 'wealth' in a world of inequality. But what's interesting is that the rich man is still trying to use Lazarus as a tool to rescue *rich* people! The ones he is really concerned about are still not the poor that he has neglected, but the rich. And there is little sense that he regrets how he has ignored *Lazarus*, or contributed to a system in which only a few can be as rich as he was, while many, many must be poor. Abraham simply says that there are all the messages they or anyone needs in Moses and the prophets.

Isaiah 58:7 “.. is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house..’

So what is the message that we might take from this story? If a parable is a story with a surprise ending, perhaps for the *first* hearers it might have been surprising to discover that in the afterlife, the blessings the rich man has experienced in life don't simply continue. Though, we know that Jesus was not the first or the last teacher to tell a story like this, and the reversal theme is not entirely a surprise in the world of story. It's there in many folk tales and fairy tales. And it's there in the Beatitudes. The hope of a very different future has been a source of hope for the poor since time began. 'It will be alright in the end, and if not's alright, then it's not the end' – says the proprietor of The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel.. If this isn't a contradiction in terms, it's the kind of surprise we've learned to expect.

What strikes *me* about this story, and what challenges me most is the notion of the unbridgeable chasm – the idea that rich and poor could be so radically separated that change cannot happen, that inequality could be so firmly fixed – whether in this life or any envisaged next one – that it cannot be overcome.

In the first part of the parable – before their deaths – the rich man and Lazarus are actually quite close together, closer than many of the rich and the poor are now in many places. There are many paintings of the story that show Lazarus all but sitting near the table. And it's easy to imagine, from experience of some contexts in the world now, that rich and poor could be as close as this. But of course though they are physically close, close enough for the rich man to know the poor man's name, they are worlds apart. The story reminds me a little of Alan Bennett's story of *The Lady in Van*, the eccentric Miss Shepherd who ends up living on his drive for about 15 years, until she, like Lazarus, dies. There is much dark comedy in this story – as Bennett recounts middle class people down the road giving a

'classical themed' party and someone in a toga offering their impoverished neighbour a plate of 'Roman remains'. He describes the awful cruelty inflicted upon her by passing strangers who taunt her and jeer or worse. Alan Bennett is very honest about his own sense of guilt about the limits to his 'charity', and offers his own reflections on inequality, as he recognises that Miss Shepherd inserts herself into the 'gap' between the social position of the people on this gentrified street and their sense of social obligation. When she dies he says,

'I am filled with remorse for my harsh conduct towards her, though I know at the same time that it wasn't harsh.' (p.39)

And he tells of how he came to know so much about her life after she had died, a kind of 'general setting-to-rights before the happy ever after.' (p.44)

And perhaps, most interesting of all, he says that Miss Shepherd never saw herself as being at the bottom of the heap, and always thought of herself as a 'cut above those in dire need'.

Alan Bennett's story is, in a way, a more grey one than the rather black and white story of the Gospels. But it does show, in its own way, how a chasm between people can indeed seem all but unbridgeable. We might feel this about the inequalities in our own world. I heard a fellow cinema goer (at The Second Best Exotic Marigold hotel) saying to her neighbour that of course the poverty in India is terrible, but there's nothing you can do about it..

It seems to me that this is one of the chief dangers of inequality, that, in its extremes, it can beguile us into thinking that 'nothing can be done'. And we put ourselves into different boxes, different worlds, rather than gather and deepen a sense of us all being part of a common humanity.

There are criticisms of inequality in our current political and development discourse that talk about it as something that, in extreme forms, is bad for all of us. But much of this criticism is about a kind of *instrumental* bad. So, inequality is bad because it is both a result and a driver of poverty. It is false to say that inequality is the price you have to pay for growth – inequality doesn't disappear eventually when you have enough growth – if anything it tends to increase, as we are seeing at the moment, both in the UK and globally.

But maybe the parable offers us an understanding that there is something *intrinsically* wrong with inequality, something deeply untrue about it, something more dangerous even than its effects, that wouldn't be put right even if we could show that giving Lazarus a food bank to go to or a homeless shelter to live in, or a recession to get through to better times, or even a different fate in the after life, would make it somehow alright. There is just something fundamentally wrong with the kind of extreme inequality that drives a deep chasm between people, so that we inhabit different lives and different worlds.

I think I've experienced this chasm in several different contexts. When I ministered in Salford, I was once struck that the Trafford Road, that divided the Salford Quays development (where Media City is now) from what was the notorious Ordsall estate was like a fast moving river – it marked one of the most deep divides in Britain – and though there was a pedestrian crossing, no-one could ever really cross that road - just as the poor man could not enter the rich man's house. When I was staying recently with a family in India, I realised that the women who spent hours of each day washing with water heated with wood and using one implement to cut shallots or scrape coconut, would never drive the smart truck parked outside the house that the men could drive. There are some who are saying today that we are becoming a UK of two nations once more.. And in our global world there is a great chasm between a bonded Indian labourer in Qatar and someone like Bill Gates, however philanthropic he may be.

It is this *extreme* inequality, whether economic or in terms of health, life expectancy, education or anything else, that seems both to deepen and reveal the chasm that divides some of us from others.

One of the problems we face is that one of main ways in which we determine who we are in the world is by comparison with others. Research has shown that people would rather live in a society with a lower average income and be at the top of it, than live in a society with a higher average income and be at the bottom. People want to be *relatively* better off – rather than absolutely better off. There is one sense in which most of actually *want* inequality and the problem is rooted in the insatiability of human desire. We say we don't like inequality, but in fact, we depend on it, if we measure our own worth and status by comparison with the wealth of others. This means that inequality, as it increases, and as we participate and collude with its almost inexorable rise, is an expression of a deep, perhaps original, sin.

The drives that produce such extreme inequality as our world experiences at the moment, and are revealed in Jesus' parable, are those which are deep in all of us. They are not about living with limits or about reflecting the generosity of God or about recognising the inherent worth of each human being, made in the image of God. They are, rather, about our need to judge ourselves by where we stand in relation to others. And they need to be challenged, as the parable does, not just because inequality doesn't 'work', but because they are rooted in that in us which needs to be transformed and which God in Christ came to change. The 'chasm' needs to be bridged.

The great irony is that, for all that we collude in, and somehow drive towards inequality, we are all better off in more equal societies. In their remarkable book, *The Spirit Level. Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (Penguin 2010), Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett write that,

'at almost any level of income, it's better to live in a more equal place.' (p.84)

People even live longer in more equal societies. The rise of inequality, and that in us which drives towards it, is in fact our shared tragedy. The rich man, as well as Lazarus, is worse off.

If a parable is not simply a kind of moral tale, but works by jolting us out of what we normally do and shows us something new, then the story of the rich man and Lazarus might show us that the chasm which is widening between us as human beings needs to be bridged and narrowed and transformed, before it is too late, for everyone's sake.

But perhaps there is a hint in the parable of a possible source of hope. The story wants to tell us that the chasm is fixed – the rich man and Lazarus must stay where they are – in death certainly and perhaps, by implication, in life. But at the end of the story, when Abraham says that they won't be convinced even if someone rises from the dead, perhaps we might, as Christian readers, reflect on the significance of Jesus' resurrection. If our faith is true, and Christ really is risen, then the great gulf between life and death has indeed been bridged, and the chasm crossed. If God could do *that*, in Christ, then is it not possible, that the chasm between the very poor and extremely rich could be crossed after all – and that Lazarus and the man in purple could sit down at last together? it is our calling, as those who follow the risen Christ, to dare to believe that possibility and to live in that hope.

Inequality is rising in the world, and economists and politicians tells us that this is bad for all of us, because of what it will bring. But we can also say, as people of faith, that it is bad for even more fundamental reasons, that we are actually made to live as one, around one table, in one humanity. We are interested in building a community which may not always achieve abstract equality, but one where no people should be separated from others by such a great chasm, and where, for everyone, the table of life, is within a hand's reach. The Christian faith is built on the hope that the greatest chasms of all, between life and death, between humanity and divinity, have all been bridged. What else can we do then but hope that the chasm created by increasing inequality may also be bridged and transformed.

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