

# Sermon Notes

**St Mark's Anglican Church  
South Hurstville**

**Social Justice Sunday  
30 September 2007**

**Preacher  
The Reverend Chris Albany  
Rector**

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**Readings: Amos 6.1a, 4-7; Psalm 146; Luke 16. 19-31**

I wonder how you respond to the buskers and beggars that are to be found on the streets of our city. Yes even in this affluent land, with our social welfare system we have our share of beggars don't we? Can't go far in the CBD without passing one often with a piece of cardboard spelling out their tragic story? Do you look the other way, occasionally drop in a coin or two to ease your conscience. Do you wonder whether that really is their story? Do you hesitate to assist because you wonder whether it might only feed an addiction? Do you ever stop to talk? I confess I don't, but wonder whether perhaps I should?

Today's Gospel about the rich man and the beggar Lazarus at his gate, confronts us with such questions, but on this Social Justice Sunday also the bigger questions about systemic injustice and inequality and how to address that. Not unrelated too to questions that divide us one from another in terms of race and ethnicity and culture and faith in a world where there is so much fear and suspicion of those who are other / different in some way whatever the difference! All issues to think about on Social Justice Sunday.

I want to share with you part of an e-mail that came Peter Millar of the Iona Community who for a few days was visiting the Eastern Cape in Sth Africa. The Eastern Cape with its thousands of villages and rolling hills is one of the poorest parts of South Africa.

He writes of driving from East London to Umtata where his second son Tim is working in one of the hospitals as an orthopaedic surgeon and on arrival at Tim's hospital being greeted by a smiling Xhosa woman selling sweets. He says, "We bought a handful, and I gave her just a little extra money. It was if she had won the lottery! After a huge hug (and is it not a miracle that black and white can hug one another openly in the new South Africa?) she began to thank me for this infinitesimal bit of extra money. I felt ashamed, as I often have during these last weeks in Guguletu. Ashamed and angry, and sad and powerless! What I had given her would buy me practically nothing in Edinburgh (maybe half a cup of coffee) and yet here it had altered her whole day. There would be nourishing food on her table tonight! She could celebrate. (Why in God's name can we not abolish the cruelty of world poverty when we can send folk into space and spend millions on shampoos for our pets?) I realise that millions ask the same question!"

With a Federal election coming up perhaps that is one of the key issues we need to be raising with candidates of all the parties. To challenge them to have a broader focus than just the domestic one and what is good for us individually and corporately. Use the halfway card of the Millenium Challenge if have not already done so.

That Gospel story also challenges us to address our own poverty – not material but poverty of spirit! As shown by the rich man in the gospel story.

Peter in the same email spoke of meeting two local women who were in the process of establishing a "Wellness Centre" based at the University of Fort Hare. This project seeks to provide a range of mental health services to people in the area where very few or no such services are offered at present.

Mfezy Bambani and Ndileka Mbalo were both born in villages in the Eastern Cape. They grew up in families where there was no money for any luxuries, yet neither of them felt themselves to be poor. What they did know, from early childhood, was the truth of the Xhosa saying – “Umntu ngumtu ngaabantu” which translated means “a person is made by other people.”

When Mfezy wanted to start a Master’s degree in psychology at Rhodes University she was asked at an interview about how she could understand better-off people coming from such a poor background herself. She replied that she did not come from a ‘poor’ back-ground. The word ‘poor’ was, she felt, only attached as a label by better-off people. She told her interviewers that the village community where she came from was all family. Every woman in the community was like a mother to her. Each carried responsibility for her well-being. She felt held in a wide love. In such a situation how could she be “poor”? Ndileka also emphasised how much the whole community had been involved in her up-bringing and how secure, as a child, she had felt in such an environment. Neither of these articulate women sought to romanticise poverty in any way, yet neither had felt ‘poor’ - even in times of hardship.

Mfezy and Ndileka also highlighted another aspect of poverty that is often over-looked, namely, that we are always hesitant to speak of the poverty of the affluent – the poverty of values, which often marks our lives and is hidden by credit cards. They asked how can we grow in true understanding if the many faces of poverty are not expressed honestly and openly in a global dialogue. It is so easy, they said, for an affluent westerner to see poverty only in an African village, without recognising their own impoverishments of spirit.

Without “solving” the dilemma posed by the woman selling sweets at the hospital Mfezy and Ndileka are inviting us into another understanding of poverty. Their understanding. Not ours. An understanding rooted in village life in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. They remind us, in a powerful way, that poverty is a reality with many faces. Peter as he drove back from Umtata to East London passed Nelson Mandela’s home built near his birth-place. From this humble place has come one of the greatest figures of our time – a man who has never lost touch with his own early poverty, yet whose wisdom is able to address so directly our technological world. Mandela’s extraordinary life in our midst, highlights the paradox that surrounds poverty – that such a ‘poor’ area can give birth to one so rich.

As I reflected on this I came back to that earlier question, “Why in God’s name can we not abolish the cruelty of world poverty when we can send folk into space and spend millions on shampoos for our pets?” or to ask it in a different way what is it that causes such structural inequality in our world and makes finding a solution so difficult.

To me a big part of the answer is our selfishness individually and collectively. Individually it is shown up by so much of what is thrown at us by the various Political parties seeking our votes as an election looms. Encouraging us to think about whether we will be better off under this policy or that policy, this government or an alternative government. Will you be better off with this six hundred dollars or that restructure of educational funding? Even when they try to get us to understand big picture issues like economic management or national security, they try to pitch it to our self-interest. The bottom line is *our* jobs, *our* housing interest rates, *our* safety. None of them seem to have any expectation that we will be concerned with what any of it means for anyone else but ourselves. Collectively it’s the problem of tribalism, or selfish nationalism. The sort of thinking that’s challenged by the following Poem by Wislawa Szymborska the Polish poet who won the Nobel prize for Literature in 1996.

It is simply entitled *Psalm*

*Oh, the leaky boundaries of man-made states!  
How many clouds float past them with impunity;  
how much desert sand shifts from one land to another;  
how many mountain pebbles tumble onto foreign soil in provocative hops!*

*Need I mention every single bird that flies in the face of frontiers  
or alights on the roadblock at the border?  
A humble robin -- still, its tail resides abroad  
while its beak stays at home. If that weren't enough, it won't stop bobbing!*

*Among innumerable insects, I'll single out only the ant  
between the border guard's left and right boots  
blithely ignoring the questions "Where from?" and "Where to?"*

*Oh, to register in detail, at a glance, the chaos prevailing on every continent!  
Isn't that a privet on the far bank  
smuggling its hundred-thousandth leaf across the river?  
And who but the octopus, with impudent long arms,  
would disrupt the sacred bounds of territorial waters?  
And how can we talk of order overall  
when the very placement of the stars  
leaves us doubting just what shines for whom?*

*Not to speak of the fog's reprehensible drifting!  
And dust blowing all over the steppes  
as if they hadn't been partitioned!  
And the voices coasting on obliging airwaves,  
that conspiratorial squeaking, those indecipherable mutters!*

*Only what is human can truly be foreign.  
The rest is mixed vegetation, subversive moles and wind.*

From *View with a Grain of Sand* selected poems 1993

I link what Szymborska has to say so insightfully with St Paul's assertion in Ephesians (3:13-end) that Christ has broken down the walls of human hostility bringing peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near. How do we live out that reality in Australia and the world today?

Let me finish with a prayer also from South Africa

*Let us dream. Let us prophesise. Let us see visions of love, peace and justice.  
Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage and in confidence  
that you, O Christ, are the life of the world.*