

Wealth

Can anything good come out of the Oxfam abuse scandal? Perhaps it is this – we can no longer fantasize that corruption is the prerogative of third world developing countries. Those who paid for sex were nice white European men. It is not just Johnny Foreigner who is unreliable and dishonest. Sin is a general human condition.

The sadness, of course, is that from the point of view of the poorest people in the world, their suspicions will be confirmed. Wealthy westerners exploited them in the last century in the name of trade, when they were clearly in charge; now wealthy westerners exploit them in the name of aid, when they are pretending to help them. If anything the new abuse is worse than the old.

There are two ways we, in the west might respond. We might decide that aid agencies are so corrupt that we should stop supporting them altogether. Our suspicions are confirmed and we need to act on them. This would be an understandable response. But a wrong one. And it is wrong for two reasons.

The first is that the need still exists and the Christian obligation to meet that need still exists. The parable of the sheep and the goats has not ceased to apply just because a hundred or so men have proved untrustworthy:

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

But this is not a bit of liberal candy floss, icing on the cake invented by Jesus in his own time. The concern for the widow, the orphan and above all the stranger runs through the Old Testament:

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Dt 10:17

What I have said so far could easily be echoed by the editor of the Guardian. But there is a second reason for supporting foreign aid. And it is not a practical one but a spiritual one, which surfaces in today's gospel. Jesus contrasts the outward piety of the hypocritical Pharisees with what he expects of his disciples. The spiritual disciplines should not be the grand gesture done to win approval but personal quiet, even secret. And the spiritual disciplines he refers to are the obvious one of prayer, the less obvious one of fasting and then almsgiving. Giving to charity is not only a matter of practical concern, it is also about our relationship with God.

When it comes to money and wealth, Jesus was something of a paradox. We know that he dined out a good deal – indeed he was criticized for it (Matthew 9:14). And yet his teaching is full of warnings about wealth. His point was that attachment to wealth can separate us from God. Jesus told stories, like the wealthy farmer who, having experienced a good harvest built a new bigger barn and settled down to enjoy a long and prosperous retirement – and promptly died. Paul summed it up

The love of money is the root of all evil.

This is often misquoted. Paul did not say that money is the root of all evil. Money represents wealth, the good things of life. They cannot be evil because they are made by God. What is the root of evil is the human attitude that makes them an object of love. We are putting wealth in the throne where God should be.

That is why Jesus regarded charitable giving as a spiritual discipline. It is training our own hearts, our own attitudes, not to love the good things that God gave us.

The response to the Oxfam scandal is not to stop foreign aid. The poor are just as poor as they always were. We are just as attached to wealth as we always were. The commandments of Jesus have not changed in the last week.

N Clews
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