

# THE PRAYERS OF THE POOR

## Sermon at the Eucharist on the Fourth Sunday of the Epiphany

Readings: Ezekiel xliii. 27 – xlv. 4; I Corinthians xiii. 1-13;  
St Luke ii. 22-40.

THE first Nowell the angels did say was to certain *poor* shepherds in fields as they lay' ... 'Trace we the Babe, who hath retrieved our loss, from his *poor* manger to his bitter cross' ... 'Not in that *poor* lowly stable, with the oxen standing by, we shall see him' ... 'Child, for us sinners *poor* and in the manger' ... 'With the *poor*, and mean and lowly, lived on earth our Saviour lowly' ... 'Dearer by far are the prayers of the poor'.

Lines from familiar Christmas carols, and not too late in the day to mention them, for the vestments are still white, and Christmastide does not officially end until Wednesday, the fortieth day of Christmas, Candlemas Day. It is the story of Candlemas, the Presentation of Christ in the temple, we have just heard.

The word common to all the carols I quoted is the word 'poor'. The *poor* manger, the *poor* stable, the *poor* shepherds, the child himself who for us sinners became *poor*. Over the centuries, the carol-writers and the crib-makers and the artists of the nativity scene have emphasized this: the poverty of Christ's birth, and, through it, God's reaching out to the poor of the earth. And the theme is not only in the Christmas story; it runs through the whole Gospel story. Christ, we read, quoting from the prophet Isaiah, came to preach good news to the poor. In St Luke's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus says, 'Blessed are you poor'. St Paul says that, 'though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor'.

But there's something missing from this picture. I have made it sound as though poverty is just the backdrop of the scene, and the poor are in that background, the silent recipients of someone else's good news. But that's not quite the picture of the poor we find in the gospels, or indeed in much of the Old Testament.

To grasp who are the poor described in the gospels, we need to go back six hundred years before the time of Jesus, when the Babylonians conquered the land of Israel and took the people into captivity. Except they didn't take *all* the people: they took the nobility and the educated classes and the skilled workers and all the people who could make a positive contribution to the economy of Babylon – people like Daniel. But they left the rest behind, a leaderless people, a deprived and destitute people, who were for long afterwards remembered as 'the poor of the land'. We hear a lot about them in the psalms: 'Defend the poor and fatherless', we read, 'see that such as are in need and necessity have right. Deliver the outcast and poor; save them from the hand of the ungodly'. These are not just *any* poor people; these are the 'poor

of the land', the people too unimportant to be taken to Babylon, the people left in a sort of internal exile of their own. And these people hoped, they longed, they prayed, and they waited for the day when God would remember them.

And when the captivity came to an end, and the exiles returned from Babylon, and Jerusalem was rebuilt, those cries and prayers and longings of the poor of the land passed into the memory and the bloodstream of the nation as a whole. The 'prayers of the poor' became what we might call a spiritual resource to which the nation could return at moments of need. And as the conquerors came and went, the Greeks and the Romans, lodged in the collective memory and piety of Israel was a habit of turning to God and longing for him to act.

So when Jesus speaks *of* the poor, and speaks *to* the poor, and identifies himself *with* the poor, and tells his disciples to become poor themselves, he is evoking something quite particular in his hearers. It is that strand in the collective memory and piety of Israel which in the face of overwhelming odds clings to the hope that one day God will set them free. Jesus does not find that attitude among the leaders of the people, or the teachers of religion, or the clergy of the temple. He finds it among those who have little or nothing – the widows, the children, the harlots, the lepers, all those who are most obviously 'the poor of the land' – the people whose lives are hopeless but who refuse to lose hope.

This morning's gospel reading, which we shall hear again on Candlemas Day, brings to an end the nativity story as told by St Luke. During the seasons of Advent and Christmas we have heard that story from beginning to end - the birth of John the Baptist, the Annunciation and the birth of Jesus, his naming and circumcision, and now his being brought to the temple to be presented to God. In the way he tells these stories, St Luke consciously evokes the traditions and the piety of the Old Testament: Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, Simeon and Anna – these are faithful Israelites. Their humble response to God is born out of that long tradition of the 'prayers of the poor'. The aged Simeon was 'righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel'. At the end of the story, Anna 'began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem'. These are the 'poor of the land', these are the people whose lives are hopeless but who have refused to give up hope. And when they burst into song, as Zechariah does, and Mary, and Simeon, it is that age-old longing of the poor to which they give voice, with a new-found joy that their longings have been rewarded: 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he hath visited and redeemed his people'; 'he hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek'; 'for mine eyes have seen thy salvation ... a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel'.

The Song of Zechariah, the Song of Mary, the Song of Simeon: the Benedictus, the Magnificat, the Nunc Dimittis - songs which since at least the time of St Benedict the Church

has sung daily at morning, evening, and night prayer. Day by day, the Church continues to recite the prayers of the poor who welcomed Christ, and day by day we echo in our hearts their joy that God has visited and redeemed his people. This magnificent cathedral church was built specifically to echo to the psalms and the canticles, the songs of the poor. The equally magnificent English choral tradition has been developed specifically to give voice to the songs of the poor. A great deal of time and effort and (let it be said) expense is devoted, and much of our new precentor's ministry will be spent, in keeping the songs of Zechariah and Mary and Simeon at the heart of our daily worship, the prayers of the poor at the heart of the life of this place.

Over the past two years I have come to realise, all over again, almost for the first time, why these particular songs should be at the heart of our life as a cathedral community. The past two years have been a sort of exile for many: deprived of so much social interaction, deprived of access to this cathedral for many months, deprived of the daily celebration of the liturgy in this place, and deprived of the music in which it is clothed. For a while we have been people in exile, the 'poor of the land'. If I managed not quite to lose hope, I can say that it was those prayers of the poor which we find in the psalms and the canticles that sustained me - the opportunity to enter in a new way into the stories of Zechariah and Elizabeth and Joseph and Mary and Simeon and Anna whose lives were without hope but who did not give up hope.

And perhaps there are other ways in which these are the prayers and songs for our time. When we look at the threat to the future of the earth, the effects of pollution and climate change, it is easy to lose hope. It is easy to turn our backs, or bury our heads, because it is so hard to look the reality of these things in the face. We know there are things we must do, and can do; but we need some hope, some songs and prayers to sustain that hope. We need to be those people whose lives are without hope, but who do not give up hope.

So I am glad that when, like Simeon, I come to this temple, or when, like Anna, I worship here night and day, it is their songs I hear.

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Preached at the Sung Eucharist in Worcester Cathedral  
on Sunday 30 January 2022.

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