

Broken

Act on Poverty

Ask Ahead: a question to consider before this session

Who in your life has been a neighbour to you?
What did they do to help you?

Scripture Reading: Luke 10.25-37

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbour as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."



1 in 3 disabled working-age adults live in poverty in the UK.

Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The British Social Attitudes Survey 2022 asked people whether they would consider someone 'in poverty' if they meet these descriptions

79% Agree Can't afford to eat and live without debt

66% Agree Can afford to eat and live but can't afford other needs

39% Agree Can afford needs but can't afford things others take for granted

What do you think of these definitions of poverty?

Reflection: How can we address brokenness and division in our context? What are we doing to show love to our neighbours? Who do we 'pass by on the other side'?

In the Gospels Jesus tells us that the world is not as it should be. Sinful actions cause harm to ourselves and others. We are all in need of forgiveness and healing.

This wasn't just a message for Jesus' first century followers. When we look around us today, we can see broken systems that deepen suffering and exclusion. We can see divisions between and within our communities. The aim of this session is to hold open a space where we can speak about what is broken in our world, where we see fractures and divisions.

'more and more people are becoming spectators, spectators to others' lives but also to their own. ... Jesus had a very clear purpose in mind when he told his story. He wanted to decrease the number of spectators and add to the number of those who feel sympathy and act on it.'

Dorothee Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak* (1984)

In our reading from the Gospel of Luke, we see the consequences of divisions fed by fear.

We don't know exactly why the Priest and the Levite of the story were so keen to hurry on past the man who had been assaulted but it seems probable that their response came at least in part from fear. Were they afraid that the man had already died and that approaching him might break religious rules around the handling of dead bodies? Were they concerned that the robbers may still be nearby and that they might become victims too? Did they fear that the man was pretending and that this was a trick of some kind?

Whatever the case, the question that was at the front of their minds was: **'If I stop for this man what will happen to me?'***

If we are honest with ourselves perhaps we can identify with this instinct for self-preservation.

But Jesus' story shows us how that question - 'what will happen to me?' - can lead to problems. When we draw boundaries around our love and concern, focusing only on ourselves and our priorities, we become people who 'pass by on the other side'. **We protect ourselves at a cost to someone else.**

The German Christian thinker Dorothee Sölle has talked about how easy it is to live as a 'passer-by', especially in the modern age. Many of us rely on people in low-paying jobs or situations of forced labour, to service our needs. It is perhaps easier for us if these people are unseen - we can 'pass by' untroubled.

Some aspects of our present-day economic and political systems increase the likelihood that we will overlook others in need. For example, the supply chains that bring us food or clothes can be hard to unpick and understand. We don't see underpaid garment workers when we select our clothes for the day or farmers in debt bondage when we make our morning cup of tea. Those with power in our society can encourage division by suggesting that a particular group is a threat. Political campaigns stir up our need for self-preservation, suggesting that there is a choice between 'us' and 'them'. **If we help someone else, we are led to ask, then 'what will happen to me?'**

*See Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., 'I've Been to the Mountaintop', a speech delivered in 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee.

The challenge of Jesus' story doesn't end with the question of whether we are like the passers-by. The person who stops to help is a Samaritan and the implication of the story is that the injured man was Jewish. Jesus would have been well aware of the hostility between Samaritans and Jewish people in his context. **Just as the Samaritan crosses the road to help, so Jesus takes his listeners by the hand and crosses the division between Samaritan and Jewish communities.** In this way, the parable pushes back against the audience's expectations. Do we need to be open to a similar challenge to our preconceptions and biases? Could we follow Jesus in telling a different story about the divisions in our communities?

As we move on in the parable, let's look closely at the Samaritan's actions. The sight of the injured man 'moved [him] with compassion'. The Samaritan's question is not 'what will happen to me?' but **'what will happen to this man if I pass by?'** The Samaritan stops and acts. He treats the man who has been robbed and provides for his welfare above and beyond his immediate need. The Samaritan is the 'one who showed... mercy'.

The word 'mercy' here is a translation for something that is not easy to express in English. It is deep loving-kindness, empathy, compassion, a willingness to reach out, a warmth to others as we find them, whatever their difficulties or circumstances, a letting-go of any animosity that divides us. It is what God extends to us, perfectly, and what God invites human beings to echo in their behaviour towards one another.

'Discrimination is part of the daily experience of people in poverty. It restricts access to employment, education, housing or social services. It may result in certain social goods or programmes not reaching people in poverty owing to discriminatory treatment by officials, employers or landlords, or to the fear of maltreatment.'

(Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, 2022)

Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan in response to the lawyer's question about loving our neighbours as ourselves. The question 'who is my neighbour?' suggests immediately a separation between those who might count or qualify as neighbours - people to whom we will show compassion and concern - and others, outsiders.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, the Letter of James speaks to churches about this kind of division. The writer warns churches against creating groups of insiders and outsiders based on perceived wealth.

'... you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here in a good place, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there"' (James 2.3)

If we do this, the writer of the letter says, how can we claim to be following the command to love our neighbours?

It's worth taking the time to consider whether we are making these kinds of distinctions, even if only in small and subtle ways. Where do we draw boundaries between insiders and outsiders? Who fits in without difficulty in our churches and communities? Who do we welcome with ease? And who might feel that they stand out?



Listen In: Stef Benstead, Disability Activist

Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/actonpoverty>
(8 mins)

In this audio resource you can hear disability activist Stef Benstead give a powerful personal account of the judgement that can come along with experiencing poverty and needing to use the benefit system. Stef discusses the daily struggles people with disabilities face as they navigate broken systems.

Have you or someone you know experienced disability? Does Stef's experience resonate with you?

Stef suggests that we may feel more comfortable with 'charity' than with 'justice'. Do you agree?



Listen In: Father Osvaldo Concepción Marte, SJ, Centro Montalvo

Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/actonpoverty>
(6 mins)

Hear Father Osvaldo talk about the work of Centro Montalvo, the social action organisation for the Society of Jesus in the Dominican Republic. Father Osvaldo says that work for social justice is an 'imperative of the faith'. In knowing Jesus, we know we need to act to help others. He refers to a 'See, Think (or Judge), Act' approach in Latin American Christian thought.

Look again at the story of the Good Samaritan. What does the Samaritan see? What does he think? How does what he sees and thinks lead him to act?



Get Inspired: Three churches creating places of welcome

Watch our short film (5 minutes) here: <https://youtu.be/2fpihBoAsHo>

This short film invites you to hear from three churches from across the country who are responding to their contexts by creating places of welcome for those who have experienced exclusion. Get inspired by:

- Revd. Chris Minchin from the Benwell and Scotswood Team, a group of Church of England parishes in the West end of Newcastle.
- Deacon Janet Jenkins from Trinity Methodist Church in Clacton-on-Sea.
- Deacon Tim Coleman from Halton Trinity Methodist Church in Runcorn.

Act on Poverty - What could you and your church do?



In this session we have been inspired by the work of churches from up and down the country. Revd Chris Minchin calls us to see how the gaps and fractures in broken systems stop some people from having the chance to flourish.

As we approach a General Election this year, what is the church's role in calling for compassion from those in power that recognises and affirms the human dignity of all people?

Action 1: Find out more about the See, Judge, Act method here:
<https://grassroots.caritas.eu/see-judge-act/>

This method helps you to look closely at social justice issues; to think about how our faith should shape our response to these issues; and to plan what we will do to bring about change. Find a way to incorporate this method into the work of your church. Are you already involved in social action? Could this method help you find new ways forward?

Action 2: If we are going to influence those with power, we need to know what their views are. Start to build a fact file about those with power in your area - such as councillors & parliamentary representatives.

With a general election coming you can also find out about people standing for election at <https://whocanivotefor.co.uk/ppcs>

What can you find out about their stance on poverty? Can you find any key pledges they've made, locally or globally? How have they voted on key issues? Do they have any relevant interests or other work that relates to poverty?

Engaging with those in power and calling them to account, is one tangible way for us to show love in action.

Closing Prayer - The Church Action on Poverty prayer

Holy Trinity, you give dignity to all

Remind us that we all are treasured by you

Loving God, you lift up the lowly

Remind us of those among us whose value is not seen

Jesus Christ, you bring good news to the poor

Remind us to reach out for justice for all

Holy Spirit, you free the captives, you challenge and inspire us

Empower us to build a society where everyone belongs. Amen.

Urzula Glienecke

