

Reading the Bible Poorly

A biblical basis for active compassion with the poor

As a young adult, I participated in a community that endeavoured to serve marginalised young people. This ministry took place on the fringe of our church. Though many in the church supported our efforts, we often encountered resistance. Partially this was due to our youthful, somewhat gung-ho approach, but equally as powerful was the perception that our motivation was “works”, not “grace”. Like any self-respecting Protestant church, it valued “salvation by grace” above all else. Consequently, our claim that serving the marginalised was a *non-negotiable* element of Christian discipleship tended to elicit criticism.

We usually explained this conflict in terms of a battle between middle-class conservatism (them) and radicalism (us). We soon realised that the battle was not about class (after all, we were *all* middle-class!) but between conflicting theological confessions. That is, what does it mean to be a disciple of Christ? Armed with this insight, the central question for us became – what is the biblical tradition of active compassion for the poor?

In the first article of this series, I argued that Australia’s welfare economy enables ordinary citizens, and particularly Christians, to defer direct involvement with the poor to other agencies. The professionalisation of compassion for the vulnerable enables us to treat welfare specialists as proxies – they do our work for us. Surely, if the work is being done, what does it matter who performs it? It is hard, thankless work. Contracting the work to specialists seems a sensible strategy.

However, the Bible narrates a disturbing tale, calling *all* disciples to serve those on the margins of our culture.

Why is the Bible so trenchant on this point? Because compassion for the poor is not a job that needs doing. Compassion for the poor is a sacrament of the reality of God. It is an outward, visible sign of an inward, invisible grace. In God’s reality, the weak, the poor, the outcast and the unclean are celebrated, included, strengthened and healed. We demonstrate our allegiance to God by participation in this sacrament, and through this participation, enter more deeply into God’s reality.

In this article, we will sketch the shape of the biblical tradition of active compassion for the poor. Using three central doctrines of the church, we will see that personal intervention in the lives of the poor is not an ‘added bonus’ of discipleship, but integral to it.

A. Creation - *imago Deo*

For 2 months in 2003, I lived the *Los Angeles Catholic Worker* community. It continues the tradition of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, the unlikely founders of the Catholic Worker movement, birthed in New York City amidst the poverty of the Great Depression. For 30 years, the Los Angeles chapter of this movement has prayed, operated a soup kitchen, provided beds for the homeless, challenged an apathetic church and endured imprisonment for their political witness.

A socialist journalist, Day experienced a dramatic conversion to Catholicism. Peter Maurin joined a French religious order, then left to evade military conscription. Day and Maurin began *The Catholic Worker*, a radical newspaper, and in the ensuing years, melded together a life of prayer, service to the poor, and political witness.

Undergirding their vision was the doctrine of *imago Deo* (the image of God), often referred to in Catholic Worker writings as ‘personalism’:

...as proclaimed and lived in the Worker, personalism affirms that every human being, as an image of God and a recipient of divine love, is a significant ‘player’ in the meaning of history.

(L. Holben, *All the Way to Heaven*, 1997)

The doctrine of *imago Deo*, is found at the very outset of the biblical story:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’ ...So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:26a, 27)

But *imago Deo* finds its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt. 25:31-46). At judgement, those who responded in compassion to the hungry, naked, sick, homeless and imprisoned discover that it was Jesus, the ultimate expression of God’s image, to whom they ministered. A shocking revelation, given that the poor of Jesus’ day were perceived to be abandoned by God (Jn 9:1-2).

The implications of *imago Deo* are twofold:

1. **Compassion is a democratic impulse.** Like God, humans are able to intervene for the good of others. There are no special techniques or skills that are required.
2. **We need to treat others as though they were God.** Furthermore, a discipleship of Jesus demands that we especially care for those who usually miss out on such treatment.

In practicing *imago Deo*, we meet Jesus face to face. Ironically, though this doctrine is traditionally Catholic, its practice results in the very thing that my evangelical church emphasised – a personal relationship with Jesus.

B. Incarnation – Downshifting vs. Vulgar Involvement

In recent years, many middle-class professionals have exchanged long working hours for a slower pace of life, a lower income and a more meaningful life. This trend has been labelled ‘downshifting’. (Make Life Not Work, *The Age*, 11/01/03).

As a social trend that moves away from greed, downshifting must be commended. However, while downshifting appears to cut against the grain, it is actually a subtle expression of our culture’s underlying selfishness. It benefits the individual downshifter and their family, but does little to benefit those on the margins of our culture. Downshifting is potentially positive in the sense of redistributing work hours across paid work and voluntary service to the community. Generally, however, it benefits privileged sectors of our culture.

In the incarnation of God as Jesus Christ, however, downshifting is redeemed and redefined as ‘vulgar involvement’ (D. Andrews, *Can You Hear The Heartbeat?*, 1995):

Let the same mind be in you as in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5-8)

Downshifting involves sacrificing material benefits for intangible benefits such as personal fulfilment, time with family, better marriages etc. In the spirit of Jesus, vulgar involvement sacrifices material benefits in order to “get our hands dirty” amongst the poor. As Paul points out, vulgar involvement can have fatal consequences – a sure reason why such discipleship has so few takers!

Despite the hardships, Paul implies that when we follow Jesus’ example of vulgar involvement, we participate in the ‘mind of Christ’. Rather than slavishly imitating Jesus’ example, we participate in God’s way of reaching out to humanity.



C. Atonement – Sacramental Action

The death and resurrection of Jesus is often used as a justification for inaction towards the marginalised and oppressed. Jesus, it is said, accomplished everything on the cross. Therefore, attempts to serve others, alleviate suffering or protest against injustice are ultimately worthless.

There are problems with this view. It is true that our commitment to the poor will not save them. But it is equally true that the death and resurrection of Jesus is not cause for apathy, inaction or a narrow focus on verbal evangelism. In his death and resurrection, Jesus takes evil personally, defeating death, restoring Creation (Col. 1:13-22). Again and again, throughout the NT, we hear that this sacrificial love is our example (Mk 8:34; Phil 3:10; 1 Pt. 2:21).

Furthermore, Jesus explicitly says that we will accomplish “greater works” than his own (Jn 14:12), and Paul claims that his own suffering for the gospel is “completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions”(Col 1:24)! As Dave Andrews writes:

We are called not only ‘to receive’ the sacrifice of Christ, but also to ‘re-enact’ that sacrifice of Christ.

(The Crux of the Struggle: The Cross as Catalyst, 2002)

This does not mean we redeem or save anyone or anything. But our actions can be “an outward sign of an inward grace”. In fact, we need to recover action as a legitimate sacrament of the church, as Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost have recently argued. Such action, they write:

“...pulls a person away from his own self-involved concerns and directs him missionally towards other human beings in such a way that they, the persons acted upon and the person acting, find God in a new way.”

(The Shaping of Things to Come, 2003)

Such an emphasis on action can lead to accusations of a “salvation by works” theology. That is to miss the point: when we follow the pattern of the cross in our lives, we penetrate more deeply into the joy of the resurrection.

Conclusion

Many other streams of biblical thought could be followed in this vein: the trinity, apocalypse, the work of the Holy Spirit, the kingdom of God, the church as the body of Christ, the prophets. Hopefully, this brief overview of creation, incarnation and atonement has demonstrated a twin reality: first, there is robust biblical justification for active compassion amongst the poor; second, that active compassion amongst the poor is not a task to be performed, but participation in the work of God in the world.

If taken seriously, these two realities leave no room for Christians to defer personal intervention in the lives of the poor to “specialists”.

But what does a life spent in service of the marginalised actually look like? Our insight in this area is flimsy, given the inadequate attention focussed upon it in our churches. In the concluding article of this series, we’ll explore the shape of Christ-like involvement in the lives of the marginalised.

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Biography

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