



HAS NOT GOD CHOSEN THE POOR?

A Pastoral Letter for the Teulu Asaph, 13th May 2020

From Bishop Gregory

Have you noticed? It struck me recently that Britain made a surprising choice. We actually chose to put the most vulnerable at the heart of our society. For a brief moment, there was talk of “herd immunity”, of letting Covid-19 run loose in order that so many people would get it, and let the majority survive, that the mass of the population would become immune. Then we realised the cost, and we actually chose to make the most vulnerable the most important, and accepted a lockdown that protected them. Okay, we haven’t done it perfectly; Government was slow off the mark, care homes were disastrously overlooked in the analysis, and a great number of deaths, each one a significant tragedy for a particular group of friends or relatives, have nevertheless occurred. However, by and large, we have consented to lockdown, and recognised that those most at risk need the gift of our protection. We have chosen to put lives already fragile over wealth and personal fulfilment.

Then, the professions we have prioritised are the carers: we clap for them every Thursday, we focus on their concerns and their needs, we recognise and applaud the work which they do for society. We accord them a certain precedence in our thinking and organisations. In society, we focus on values such as kindness, generosity and mercy, and I very much doubt if there are many other circumstances in which a centenarian could raise over £30M for the NHS by walking around his garden.

After Covid, we shall resume life in community, and I believe that we are called by God not to forget the lessons for our society that we have learned in the crisis – that the poor and the vulnerable are those who should be first in our thoughts in our society, and that those who care for and heal are amongst the most important vocations and professions.

I am reminded of the early Church. When James, the brother of the Lord, took over the leadership of the Church, he wrote to the early Christians about the way in which Church life was developing, and he warned the Church against a bias towards the rich and the powerful. As they started to frequent Christian worship, the temptation was to make a fuss of the people who brought money, power and influence into the Church. “Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters,” he wrote, “has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?” (*James 2.5*) James argued for the value of every child of God, and against preferential treatment for those who held the keys of influence. That radical egalitarianism has always amazed the world when the Church has been able to live into such a vision, and that must be the sort of society that Christians fight for once the lockdown is unlocked. Whether it be Francis in the thirteenth century, or Mother Theresa in the twentieth, we have admired their example, even when we have shuffled around the edge of it in our own decision making. Now is the chance to say “Look, we’ve made the shift already. Let’s abide by it”, and consider how a bias to those in need and to those who care might affect the future.

We cannot go back simply to the way things were. We have suffered, we have learned, we have changed our priorities. When I was very young, “the Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge was serialised on the back cover of my weekly comic. It bored me silly. But I do remember that at the end of it, the narrator goes away “a sadder and a wiser man”. The world post-Covid may well feel sadder and more fragile. Will we be wiser from what we have learned? In the words of Jesus himself, “Inasmuch as you do it for the least of my brethren, you do it as for me.” (*Matthew 25.40*)

My thanks as ever to those who do so much in our society, and in the life of the Church, to sustain us and to care. May God bless each one of you with strength, resilience and hope.