

St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



February 2011

A Message from the Rector:

“The little that the righteous has * is better than great riches of the wicked.”
(Psalm 37:17)

Dear Friends, It was October in 1967. Three days earlier I had been dropped in Antigua as the new Peace Corps teacher at the Boys Grammar School. I still had no place to live, so I was hopeful when two guys I had just met said they had a friend with space to rent. I piled into their Mini and we drove out to Fort James Beach near the deep water harbor where their friend was working on the dredge. Two of us waited in the car while the third ran out to the dredge. As we waited Frankie asked me, “So you came all the way down here to teach? You give up everything? That’s a big sacrifice, Man.” As he was speaking, I was looking out over a beautiful, blue sea where on the horizon I could see clearly the high mountains of the islands of Montserrat and St Kitts thirty miles away. In front of us on the white sandy beach under the shade of swaying palm trees two children rode donkeys splashing through the white surf and laughing all the while. I had just left central New Jersey where the aftermath of the race riots in nearby Newark were still smoldering on the streets and in the hearts of people. In spite of the Civil Rights Act there were still abuses, and a raging war demonstrated every day that the poor were expendable. In my New Jersey the horizon always disappeared into a grey haze and the air always had a sour, sulfurous pong.

I wanted to tell Frankie that he had it wrong. His world had everything. Mine would be better missed. But I couldn’t say that. It would be presumptuous. He, after all, saw opportunities for improvement - a better quality of life. The reports he had of the “developed” world were of running water, indoor plumbing, jobs, appliances, and a variety of entertainments. None of these things were universally guaranteed in Antigua of 1967. Was I to say, “Forget it! You’re better off as you are?” I had left behind that world for a time by choice. I had the option of returning to it, which, in fact, I did. So I said nothing, leaving him to view my presence in the Caribbean as a kind of martyrdom.

St Francis is the Christian saint most closely associated with and revered for his embrace of poverty. He was not born into a poor, deprived family, however. As a young man he made a deliberate decision to leave the affluence of his home. He embraced poverty and lived among the poor, but I am not aware that he ever told the hungry and wretched people

he served that they were better off as they were! Through poverty he was freed to rejoice and serve in the spirit of the Gospel encounter of Jesus with a devout but rich young man. **“Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’” (Mark 10:21)** That young man refused Jesus’ offer, but many others did not, and they have known his blessing.

The blessings of Christian poverty aside, being poor is not a pretty thing. We see some bad stuff around us in Camden - homeless men and women carrying all their worldly goods in a plastic bag, people sleeping in doorways or on park benches, or people who fall victim to thugs in the night. As bad as it gets, we are well aware that there are parts of the world where it is even worse! This kind of grinding poverty has catapulted many of us into making a response, because responding to such basic needs is so obvious. Cathedral Kitchen, Frank’s Place, and even the VOA shelters in Camden are all the result of good people seeking to address local poverty. Our own Sunday Breakfast and “Soup & Song” community supper are the result of our stepping up to do our part. As long as the poor are with us - and, according to our Lord Jesus, this is likely to be until the Kingdom comes - our acts of caring and sharing are the right response.

However, there is more to poverty than the most obvious hunger and nakedness. Camden is a city of poor people. That does not mean that all are homeless or near starvation. Many own homes, have jobs, and send their children to school. A significant number are law-abiding, church-going, tax-paying, upright citizens. Many have carved out a decent and comfortable life in their neighborhoods. The jobs for which the city was once famous are now nearly all gone. Well over half of the working population of the city works outside Camden, mostly in Camden and Burlington counties. Some residents continue to live in the city because they are emotionally attached to it and to their neighbors. Whether “attached” or not, all are here because they can afford to be. These are the less obvious poor. Some have no access to health care and can not afford private insurance. None are given much respect in the corridors of power. The recent lay-offs in Camden illustrate the point. Governors and mayors wring their hands about their shrinking budgets. Public employees bemoan the loss of fringes and benefits. No one even mentions the citizens - the poor - whom they were either hired or elected to serve. It has become a world-wide scandal! And that is no exaggeration! I had a telephone call from a friend in New Zealand who said she heard it on the news! “The second most dangerous city in the USA cuts its police force in half!”

Camden people may have been ignored for decades by those in power, but Bible believing Christians can not so easily dismiss them. We are compelled to respond to the needs of *all* the poor and respect their dignity. During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity the anchor text read and preached each night was from the Prophet Isaiah. **“Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” (Isaiah 58:12)** We gathered as the Christian community in Camden - Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, and Pentecostals - lifting up the name of Jesus Christ in praise and asking him to build, restore, and repair. The people gathered were not the wise or powerful of this world, but we have good reason to believe that God chooses what some deem weak or foolish to shame the wise and powerful. (See *I Corinthians 1:18 - 31*) We prayed that we and our church communities might be used by him that the men, women,

and children of this city might be raised up.

The Prophet Isaiah - speaking for God - calls believers to be repairers and re-builders. It is to be an integral part of true worship. [God's people ask,] ***“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” [The Lord says,] “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers. ... Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isaiah 58:3, 6-7)*** It seems that it is not possible to practice our religion rightly unless care and justice for the poor are at the heart of it. We will all hear this passage very soon in our churches. It is one of those appointed for Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. It is a day of fasting and penitence, when we are called to confess our failures and hear again what we need to do to correct them. And what does our God require of us? ***“...to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)***

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.” These words Jesus read to the congregation in the synagogue at Nazareth. He then put down the scroll and added, ***“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:18-19, 20)*** It's not an overstatement to say that our Faith calls us to have passion for the poor. But there is a lot of frustration involved. Many of the most desperate poor seem to be their own worst enemies. The ordinary or working poor seem to have such a dreadful uphill battle. The powerful always assume that they can overlook them, because they so often get away with it. When the dispossessed stand up for themselves power draws together to suppress once again. But the word of Jesus stands, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” We take heart in the words of the psalmist,,

***“Do not fret yourself because of evildoers; * do not be jealous of those who do wrong.
For they shall soon wither like the grass, * and like the green grass fade away.
Put your trust in the LORD and do good; * dwell in the land and feed on its riches.
Take delight in the LORD, * and he shall give you your heart's desire.
Commit your way to the LORD and put your trust in him, * and he will bring it to pass.”***
(Psalm 37:1 - 5)

May God strengthen our resolve to renew, rebuild, and restore. The glory, praise, and victory belongs to him!

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