

Monthly reflection, July 2013

The quiet scandal of child poverty

What do you think of when you hear the word 'poverty'? What comes to mind when the word 'child' is added to it?

Child poverty is an issue in many so-called developed countries. In the UK, generally accepted as being the 7th richest nation in the world, the fact that well over 3 million children are defined as living in poverty is a quiet scandal!

Throughout the Old Testament there are rules and commands to take care of the poor, and it was part of the innate structure of God's people that the poorest were protected from the worst. We also see Jesus valuing the marginalised in society, those being the poor, the beggars, the women and the children.

In our nation, where the political rhetoric about 'skivers' and the 'work-shy' abounds, it is a challenging lesson to learn that two thirds of children living in poverty are in homes where the adult or adults work. Wages have slipped to poverty levels, and so have children. The child poverty of Dickens' world does not seem to have gone away, even though we no longer send children up chimneys!

As we look at the past through rose-tinted memories and family myth we may think 'It did me no harm;' and 'they don't know what poverty is'. Many of us can proudly declare that we were 'poor but happy', with a childhood of some material poverty but no poverty of care or love.

Before we go too far down the line of 'they've never had it so good', we need to consider what children need now to live well and to thrive, and not be socially excluded. For instance, if children have no internet access so many things that are open to others such as research, communicating and networking, keeping aware of the news, and doing homework will be closed to them. But it's not just the 'frills' that children in poverty are lacking. The rapid rise in schools providing free breakfast clubs shows that a good proportion of children are not getting breakfast before they leave home, and are therefore not in a healthy position to learn when the school day begins.

Child poverty is not just financial or material – children suffer when they live with poverty of love, poverty of relationships, and spiritual poverty. Every child needs the support, encouragement and knowledge to grow, spiritually as well as developmentally.

God's kingdom is a place where children grow well, knowing and experiencing all that contributes to their well-being and positive growth. As Christians it seems to me that we must respond to this stain on our society by saying all we can and doing all we can to make sure that poverty really does become a thing of the past.

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