

## MPH – HOW FAST CAN WE GO?

For a long time during my lifetime MPH meant Miles Per Hour. I remember as a little boy when my Dad took the family out in our Morris Minor and he announced with great excitement, 'We're going to do 50 miles an hour.' It seems a world away now.

But just recently those letters MPH have been cropping up all over the place with a new meaning: Make Poverty History. The question still applies: how fast can we go?

What does God have to say about poverty in the Bible? Perhaps one observation will help us get things in perspective. When I looked up the word 'poverty' in a concordance there were just 20 occurrences. But when I looked up the word 'poor' there were 177 occurrences, nearly nine times as many. In other words God does not encourage us to think about poverty in the abstract. His word reminds us forcibly that we're talking about people – the poor.

When God chose the descendants of Abraham and let them out of slavery in Egypt he gave them laws to govern their life as a nation. In Deuteronomy chapter 8 Moses envisages a situation where they have become prosperous and he says to them: 'When your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied ... you may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today' (verses 13, 17, 18).

Wealth is a gift from God but there are dangers associated with it. Wealth may make us selfish and turn us away from God. Jesus said, 'It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 19:23).

Going back to God's plan for his Old Testament people Israel we find some interesting verses in Deuteronomy chapter 15.

Verses 1 to 5: 'At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the LORD's time for canceling debts has been proclaimed. You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your brother owes you. However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.'

'There should be no poor among you' (verse 4). Side by side with this God says in verse 11, 'There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.' There's a balance here to be maintained. On the one hand, there should be no poor among you. On the other hand, there will always be poor people in the land.

Some Christians have been guilty of driving a wedge between evangelism and social action. They have latched on to the occasion when Jesus quoted this Old Testament text' (John 12:1-8). Mary, the sister of Lazarus, had anointed him with expensive perfume. Judas had complained, 'Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?' but Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.'

Jesus was contrasting the ongoing needs of the poor with the immediate situation which Mary had grasped. When he said, 'You will always have the poor among you,' he didn't mean there's nothing you can do about it. Going back to Deuteronomy chapter 15 verse 11 the full verse reads like this. 'There will always be poor people in

the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.' There's a 'therefore'. It's amplified in verses 7 and 8. 'If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs.'

When it came to harvest time the farmers were given this instruction (Leviticus 19:9, 10). 'When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.' You will recall that in the book of Ruth, she benefited from this liberal policy.

I had a history tutor at university and I've always remembered this observation that he made. It was at a time when communism dominated a greater part of the world than it does today. He said that if all the wealth in the world were gathered together and divided up equally, within half an hour one man would be driving a Rolls Royce and another would be selling matches. I'm sure that's true.

Make poverty history: yes. But don't think that it ends there. We will always have the poor with us and concern for the poor is an ongoing responsibility. If Bob Geldof and his merry men do succeed in making poverty history, within five years at most poverty will be on the agenda again.

The book of Proverbs has a lot to say on this subject. It reminds us that there is more than one way of looking at poverty. We need to see it from different perspectives. Here is just a small sample, starting with a general principle.

Chapter 28 verse 19: He who works his land will have abundant food, but the one who chases fantasies will have his fill of poverty.

Chapter 21 verse 17: He who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich.

Chapter 24 verses 33, 34: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest— and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man.

Now here's a different perspective.

Chapter 13 verse 23: A poor man's field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away.

Chapter 29 verse 7: The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.

Where does God come into the picture?

Chapter 22 verse 2: Rich and poor have this in common: The LORD is the Maker of them all.

Chapter 14 verse 31: He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God.

Chapter 21 verse 13: If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.

Chapter 19 verse 17: He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done.

Chapter 31 verse 9: Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Finally a prayer.

Chapter 30 verses 8, 9: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God.

In the Scripture Union scheme which we follow on Sunday mornings the passage for today is John 2:1–12, the first miracle performed by Jesus. It didn't take place where we might have expected. It wasn't at an open-air rally or a healing meeting. It wasn't even in the synagogue or temple. It was at a wedding in Cana, in Galilee.

The miracle itself is perhaps not what we might have expected. It wasn't the healing of the sick or the driving out of demons but turning water into wine.

Weddings are extravagant affairs. I've been reading Aled Jones's autobiography recently and when he got married to his wife Claire they had the reception in the Criterion, one of the restaurants owned by the famous restaurateur Marco Pierre White. Aled describes the arrangements like this: 'He told us that he would let us use the Criterion to hold our reception. He was in a great mood and every time Claire drank a glass of champagne, he knocked a thousand pounds off the cost of the restaurant. The poor girl could not even look at a glass of champagne for months afterwards.'

How many thousands of pounds does a wedding cost these days? If we think it was any different in Jesus' time we would be wrong. Weddings were no small occasions. They could last up to a week and involved massive celebrations.

How does this miracle of Jesus fit with our theme this morning, Make Poverty History? Jesus wasn't a kill-joy. He joined in the celebrations and in fact he rescued the situation when their worst nightmare came true and the wine ran out. He used that situation to reveal his glory and to indicate that the old Jewish ceremonial rituals were empty and redundant. He was replacing them with the new wine of God's kingdom. He turned water into wine.

Jesus could mix with the rich. He often attended banquets and was criticised for it. But he never lost his concern for the poor. Indeed the Bible says, 'You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9).

In Luke chapter 14 verse 13 Jesus said, 'When you give a banquet, invite the poor...'  
In James chapter 2 verse 5 we read, 'Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?'

Rich in faith. Those riches are available to everyone in Christ, whatever their standard of living. There is a spiritual poverty prevalent in the world. As foretold by the prophet Amos there is 'a famine of hearing the words of the LORD'. Today as we think about material poverty let's not forget that spiritual poverty. When we think about cancelling the debts of third world countries let's not forget that greater debt caused by sin. When Jesus taught us to pray, 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors' he wasn't thinking principally of economic debts but our sins.

In that great model prayer Jesus taught us to pray, 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'  
The problems of earth will not be solved until our Father's name is hallowed on earth as it is in heaven. We will not experience the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven until we bow the knee to the King and acknowledge his sovereignty. We will not make poverty history until his will is done on earth as in heaven.