

**Life on a \$ a day: Is God just?
Christ Church @ Aldo's Place
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The Scourge of Global Poverty

Yesterday was my little daughter Rosie's 3rd birthday. It was a lovely day. In the morning she opened her presents. We're not mega crazy on presents in the Evans household but she got some lovely things – a whiteboard easel, a new duvet cover, a wooden train and a t-shirt.

I guess between us, grandparents, friends at church and her little friends from nursery she had about £100 of presents and a little money to put in the bank.

1 billion children, half of the world's population, live in poverty. That means they live in families with less than \$2 per person per day income. Or, if you want a meaningful comparison with my family, 1 billion children live in families with income for a family of 4 less than £1,460 a year.

For such families Rosie's modest birthday presents would represent 4 weeks income.

And it's not just about birthday presents.

Because poverty has more consequences than people having small bank balances.

In a large number of countries in the world 1 child in 5 dies before reaching their fifth birthday. In the UK that figure is about 1 child in 200. And do you know those parents don't love their children any less than we do.

Those who live can expect to be permanently hungry – tens of millions of people around the world are not able to get more than 1,000 calories a day and are chronically undernourished.

They will probably be amongst the one billion people who cannot read a book or sign their name.

And they are likely to live in places where vicious governments oppress people without cause or due process. Where corruption is rife and where even what meagre aid does arrive is often siphoned off into the pockets of a small elite who control the limited wealth of many developing nations.

Life on a \$ a day is not some sort of romantic escape from the mindless consumerism of Western Europe. It is grindingly, excruciatingly, unremittingly terrible and miserable.

And it is present in our world on a vast scale.

If you have just £6,000 a year you are richer than 87% of the world's population.

Our world is not a world where most people are doing quite nicely and a few are really having a hard time.

Our world is a world where the majority of people are living in dreadful poverty and a tiny, elite group – us, sitting in this room are absolutely overwhelmed with resources and possessions. That is the reality of global poverty.

And, of course, that is nothing like the reality. Because statistics like this are, in many ways, meaningless. Our heads can take them in but our hearts cannot.

As Joseph Stalin said: "*One death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic.*"

Each day 30,000 children, each as special as Madeline McCann, die for no other reason than that they are too poor to stay alive.

Poverty and the rejection of God's justice

For many people, this appalling suffering, is a profound reason to reject the existence of God – if there is no justice clearly there can be no God.

That is a completely awful argument. After all if there is no God there can be no justice. Because without God there is no moral authority to define what is just and what is not. If there is no god then all we can say is that life is meaningless – and that for many people it is also short, poor, brutal and totally crap.

Fare more compelling and deserving of serious attention, however, is another response to global poverty. Not the response of the person who says that such suffering will make them an atheist – and thus remove any reason they could have for believing in goodness in the first place. But the person who acknowledges that our very sense of justice, goodness, the value of other people and that the world SHOULD be different leads them to believe in the existence of God.

But whose observations of the misery and pain of our world makes them wonder whether perhaps

God either doesn't care – or does care but isn't able to help.

And that is the question we're exploring tonight. In the face of global poverty can Christians really assert that God is just – both in the sense that he cares enough about justice to see it done AND that he has the power to bring justice about?

And if God is just what is the evidence for that?

PAUSE

The teaching of the Bible: God is just

The conviction and belief of the many authors who wrote the collection of books we know as The Book – the Bible – was that God IS just.

And that was not because they all lived in some ethereal world untouched by human misery. Not at all. The Bible's authors were wrongfully imprisoned, saw their friends made slaves, raped or unjustly killed. They experienced the oppression of whole nations on ethnic lines. They saw first hand the horrors of war – both as victors and vanquished. They knew what it was like to have a child die, to get divorced, to be desperately and painfully sick, to be hungry, thirsty and homeless. The Bible writers experienced rejection by their parents, abuse by their siblings and betrayal by their friends.

And yet, again and again, the authors of the Bible assert the goodness and justice of God.

Here, for example, are the words of Moses – a man who narrowly escaped infanticide, was labelled a murderer for defending one of his own people and spend 40 years tending sheep in a desert.

"I will proclaim the words of the Lord. Oh praise the greatness of our God! He is the Rock, his works are perfect and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he." (Deuteronomy 32:3-4)

Later in Old Testament history the nation of Israel was invaded by foreign armies and many of God's people complained about God's failure to intervene in order to rescue them. Here is the response that God gives through his prophet Ezekiel:

"Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear, O house of Israel: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?" (Ezekiel 18:25-26)

And writing to Christian believers suffering persecution and hardship in first century Greece the apostle Paul, who experienced almost every hardship it is possible for a human being to

undergo, wrote clearly and boldly to those who were struggling with their faith under pressure: "God is just." (1 Thessalonians 1:6)

The testimony of Christians: God is just

And it is not just a bunch of dead people who wrote the Bible who are convinced about that. For many complex reasons the Christian faith is in decline in the Western world and has been for some 100 years now.

But in Africa, Asia and South America hundreds of millions of people have become Christians in the last few decades. They represent every colour and variety of the church. And those millions of people, no doubt, disagree on many things in the world.

But millions of desperately poor Christians in the world are totally convinced that God is just. They are absolutely persuaded that their hardships and deprivations are not a sign that God does not care about them. Instead these multitudes, unknown to us, believe in the personal care and love and the final complete justice of God.

But, you may be thinking, that's all very well. It's fine for the Bible and Christian people to assert the goodness and justice of god in the face of poverty. But if God is really so just why does poverty exist? And what is God, if he is just, going to do about it?

Wake up and smell the coffee

The first thing to say about this is that global poverty is, largely, our responsibility. I don't mean just the people sitting here in this room tonight – though we are each individually part of the problem. I mean wealthy Westerners like you and me who consume a ridiculous proportion of the resources of the world.

Because although there are very many poor people in the world the rich people, us, are SO rich that we could all, easily, transform the world of the poor.

The following statistics are well known but, nevertheless, very striking:

US/Europe annual spend on perfume: \$12 billion (£20 per person)

Total additional annual cost of providing water and sanitation for all people in the world: \$9 billion

European spending on alcohol and cigarettes: \$155 billion

Cost of providing basic health, nutrition, education and water for the whole world: <\$50 billion

In other words the problems of world poverty could be massively reduced, though not entirely solved, by normal, ordinary westerners like you and me putting our hands in our pockets and spending some money on development instead of lipstick and lager.

The 20% of the world's richest people – that is anybody with more than £1,000 a year – have 74 times more income than the 20% of the world's poorest people.

Rich nations like the UK use 85% of the world's water despite having only 12% of the population.

5% of the world's population use 23% of its energy.

Our world is desperately unequal – and we are the main problem.

One writer has commented that for human beings, especially people in rich nations, to complain that global poverty shows God is not just is like buying a new computer, smashing it up with a hammer and then taking it back to the shop and complaining it doesn't work.

The Bible writers do, occasionally, wrestle with the question of suffering caused by unpredictable disaster (acts of God if you like), but for the whole of the last 4,000 years thoughtful people have recognised that the vast majority of poverty is caused by wickedness, exploitation or straightforward thoughtlessness on the part of other people.

And the God who made us capable of real, morally significant decisions also ensures that, generally, we, and others, live with the consequences of those decisions.

And God is not inactive in the face of this reality.

He does two things about it.

God instructs us to do justice

Firstly he vigorously and repeatedly instructs people to be just and generous. Much of the Old Testament law centres around the responsibility of the Israelites to provide for every person in their nation AND for foreigners who come amongst them.

The prophet Amos railed against the complacent wealth of the rich of Israel and their oppression of the poor by offering low prices for good, taking away their capital (the land they farmed) and setting up systems of "justice" that were anything but just. "Let justice roll on like a river" God cries and promises destruction and judgment on those who

are cruel, by active infliction of suffering on the poor or by quiet complicity in enjoying the comforts of wealth.

The Lord Jesus was adamant that the sharing of goods and wealth for the relief of poverty and distress was a duty for all who claimed to follow him and he explicitly said that the way people treat the poor was a mark of whether their professed love and concern for Jesus was real.

God has acted against poverty by spelling out, as clearly as could possibly be, its evils and wickedness.

God enables us to do justice

AND he has acted by making it possible for people with natures that are selfish and sinful to be transformed into people who are generous and open handed.

You see for the Bible writers it is no surprise that there is terrible poverty in the world. From the earliest days of the Bible there is a recognition that, because human beings live in a state of rebellion against God, we also live in a state where we do not love other people as we ought.

That means that until the return of Jesus Christ there will always be poor people in the world. That is what Jesus taught. But he also made clear that to follow him, to trust in his death for the forgiveness of sins is the way to receive a whole new nature. It is because God acts in justice at the cross – ensuring that sin is punished in his Son, a representative king and head of the human race – that God can justly forgive people and grant them a new kind of life.

A new heart, if you like, that is not self-centred and selfish but which loves God and other people.

When operating as it should the Christian church, and Christian people, are a powerful agency for the relief of poverty in the world.

It is a well researched and documented fact that evangelical Christians – those who hold to beliefs about Jesus Christ that are set out in the Bible such as his incarnation as God's son, virgin birth, death on the cross and bodily resurrection – give, on average, 4 times more to charitable causes than the average of the population.

Now I agree that is still not as much as we could and should do. But it is an awful lot – billions and billions of dollars, much of which goes to all sorts of ministries of mercy in the developing world.

Christians are NOT perfect – as any of you who know any will be aware. But they are people whose hearts have been transformed to recognise that just a God gives grace and forgiveness to us – the undeserving spiritually bankrupt – so we are to show mercy to those who, for whatever reason, find themselves poor or destitute.

And it is, on the whole, organisations founded by Christian people with Christian convictions that are the one providing relief of poverty across the globe funded by money from Christian people.

Charities like World vision (£1 billion a year), World Relief (£30 million), Tear Fund (£53 million) and Christian Aid (£80 million). [Oxfam £300 million].

None of this is to be self-congratulatory or back slapping. Because Christians ought to do more. And what they do achieve is enabled by God's grace not personal moral superiority. But it remains a stubborn fact that Christians do more to relieve poverty in the world than their atheist and agnostic friends.

Blogger "friendlyatheist" recognises this. His top two things that Christians are better at than atheists:

1. Doing charity work
2. Giving money.

God is bringing about a just world

In the end though God has a final and complete answer to the problem of the terrible injustice in the world.

God's plan and purpose is to remove the sinfulness of human beings in the world and his consequent judgment.

His plan is a recreated world of people from every tribe and nation and language where there will be no poor people. Where even wealth of west will seem pathetic in comparison with the material resources that are shared gladly and justly amongst all the billions of people who live in that world.

And this is not empty talk of pie in the sky when you die. God has proven his intention and his ability to bring about this world in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. A real, historical, empty tomb in Jerusalem proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is committed to a new world where his just rule will be unchallenged and where all will live in plenty.

You might think that the prospect of such a world could lead Christian people to not bother helping the poor now. But the evidence of history is exactly the opposite. Christian people, for 2,000 years, have sought to model, in a small way, the perfections of the new earth by bringing relief and help to people here and now.

Christians are committed to working towards the resolutions of injustice in the world because we know that God is committed to that.

Only his final intervention – the return of Jesus, the last judgment and the establishment of a profoundly remade world – will bring that about completely.

But until that day comes – a day to which hundreds of millions of poor Christians in the world are looking forward – God's appeal to all people is to trust Jesus so we can participate in that new earth.

In summary:

God IS just.

He repeatedly talks of his justice.

He demands justice as the standard of his people and of all governments.

He demonstrates justice at the cross.

He actively intervenes in the world, especially through his people!

He unveils a perfectly just new creation for all who will accept his gift.