

Heart for the poor

Valleys Family Church Sermon
Stuart Wheatman, Sunday 21st February 2016

Intro-

- On learning of his terminal cancer diagnosis, Stephen Sutton was determined not to become a "sob story". Instead of cursing his misfortune, the teenager drew up a bucket list of 46 things to do before he died, including playing drums in front of a huge crowd, getting a tattoo, skydiving and - most significantly - raising £10,000 for the Teenage Cancer Trust. What began as a tumour in Stephen's bowel, diagnosed in September 2010, quickly spread to his knee and then to his lungs and liver. In just over three years, he underwent seven major operations and four different regimes of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. But it was the picture of him giving a thumbs up and posting a goodbye message on Facebook in April 2014 that prompted people from around the world to donate to his cause. Stephen died 14th May 2014. The total now stands at an amazing £4,994,722.23
- If you had one year left to live how would you live it? Wouldn't it be great to do something like Stephen Sutton did? What if we decided to live like that every day anyway- to make a difference with our lives?
- Our vision- make disciples- Matt 28. How? Preach the gospel and plant and strengthen churches. 8 areas of focus: Discipleship, worship, evangelism, prayer, presence of God, ministry, fellowship and mercy.

Read Mt 25:31-46

- **Parables-** Important to look at the context of the parable for the correct interpretation and not to read more into the parable than was originally intended for the story, or can get into doctrinal error.
- Here the context is Jesus' disciples pointing out how impressive the temple is. Jesus responds by prophesying that it will be destroyed (which it was by the Romans in AD 70) and they literally didn't leave one stone on another- the western wall (wailing wall) is just a retaining wall. In private the disciples then ask when this will be and what the sign of his coming will be and the close of the age. Jesus answers with a series of 7 illustrations and parables- all of which point to the same thing- being ready for the return of our Lord.
- **1. Nature-** Fig tree- read the signs of the season to know when it will bear fruit- so Jesus' return will be preceded by signs.
- **2. Scripture-** Flood of Noah- Jesus' return will take many by surprise as did Noah's flood.
- Just like Noah's flood people will be suddenly and unexpectedly taken- 2 men in a field, 2 women grinding at a mill- 1 taken the other left- so Jesus warns we should stay awake- i.e. be ready for His return.
- **3. Law and Order-** Jesus' return will be like a thief in the night- therefore be ready.
- **4. The Household-** Jesus return will be like a master coming back from a trip and leaving his servant in charge of serving food to the household. That servant should be ready for the master's return by getting on with the work allocated to them, or the return of the master will come as a nasty surprise if they are neglecting their duties and abusing their position of trust.
- **5. Marriage customs-** Jesus' return will be like a bridegroom on his wedding procession from his own house to wife's father's house. When the wedding day

finally arrived the bridegroom would dress himself in festive garments, wearing a crown of gold, or silver, or flowers. He would proceed with his friend and other attendants from an unknown place at an unknown time to the bride's father's house. The virgins of Israel would be outside waiting along the way in the evening with their oil lamps lit, until the loud warning cry, "Behold the Bridegroom Comes, Go Out to Meet Him," and they would meet him and proceed with him to the entrance of the bride's father's house, who had prepared herself for him. They would then process together to the bridegroom's house for the start of the 7-day wedding festivities. Guests would then be given festive garments and the doors would be shut closed. Jesus said we should be like virgins prepared with plenty of oil for our lamps so that we are not caught out when the bridegroom arrives on his procession to his bride. In other words -live our lives in a way which shows preparedness for his return.

- **6. Business world-** The next parable is the parable of the talents- a master is going on a long journey and entrusts his possessions to his servants giving each a weight of money according to their ability- one has 5 talents (a measurement of weight of a metal such as gold) one has 2 talents and one has 1 talent. They all double what they have except the one with 1 who is lazy and buries it in the ground, because he thought his master was 'hard on people'. They all get rewarded when the master returned apart from the one who hasn't invested his master's money. Jesus was saying that we should be like the savvy stewards and get on with the work entrusted to us by Jesus before he returns.
- **7. Agriculture-** Normally, sheep and goats were herded and allowed to graze together during the day. At night they would be gathered into enclosures that protected them from wild animals, thieves, and the cold. (Genesis 30:32, 33; 31:38-40) The two types of animals would be placed in separate enclosures to protect the relatively docile sheep, particularly the ewes and the lambs, from harm that could be inflicted on them by the more aggressive goats. The shepherd also separated the sheep from the goats when "breeding, milking, and shearing," (says the book *All Things in the Bible*).
- **What this is not saying-** that we get to Heaven by our good works. The Bible is clear that no amount of good works will get us to Heaven, or Jesus died for nothing. However, the Bible is clear that good works accompany salvation- this is the point that James makes in his epistle 'Faith without works is dead'. When we truly receive the mercy of God it makes us want to show that same mercy and love to those around us- it changes us.
- **Good works or theology?** Which is important? Both. At times Evangelical Christians have shyed away from the 'Social' Gospel as they see such a compromise in message that the Liberals have brought. However we need to be like Jesus and the early Church- firing on all cylinders- preaching the Gospel AND caring for the poor and afflicted- this the Kingdom coming to earth. In Heaven there is no poverty and we need to bring that aspect of God's reign and Justice here to Earth. In this parable and the others we see the importance of works in being prepared for our Lord's return. Notice in the parable of the goat and sheep there is no theology test- it is lifestyle here which is being scrutinised by God. As Mark Twain said 'It aint the parts of the Bible I don't understand which bother me, it's the parts I do understand'.
- **Rewards-** Notice in v 34 there is the promise of great blessings for obedience- Jesus encouraged his followers to build purses for themselves in heaven which won't wear out -Lk 12:33. The rich young ruler in Matt 19:21 was told by Jesus to

sell his possessions and give to the poor and he would have treasures in Heaven. In Luke 14:13-14 Jesus says if you put on a banquet for the poor you will be rewarded in the resurrection of the righteous. In Luke 6:38 Jesus said to give and it would be given to you according to the measure you use. How is our heavenly bank balance doing? Do we want to put some more deposits into it?

- **'The end is nigh'**- 1Pet 4:7 says 'the end of all things is near'. Are we living like we believe this. Jesus wanted the thought of His imminent return to motivate His people to the work He has called them to -Matt 28 to make disciples of all nations, and this includes preaching and being good news to the poor.
- **Jesus modelled something to us**- He became poor so we could become rich- For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)
He left the glories of Heaven to be born on Earth, living a simple life- He only had the clothes on His back, had nowhere to lay His head, and yet he kept a purse for the poor (managed by Judas Iscariot). **Jesus came for the poor- Luke 4:18 'To preach the gospel to the poor'**- Jesus was quoting from. In Isaiah 61:1 the Hebrew word for poor is עָנִי anav. This word can be translated poor, afflicted, humble, meek, depressed (figuratively), in mind (gentle) or circumstances (needy, especially saintly) - lowly. Most of the time however it is translated as **'humble'**. It is the word used to describe Moses in Numbers 12:3- Moses was very humble,(anav) more than any. God doesn't show favouritism- he doesn't prefer the poor, but the fact is that riches and contentment can often mean people become indifferent to God- hence Jesus saying how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God- they are trusting in their wealth. It was often those society didn't have a lot of time for that found the message of Jesus to be good news- prostitutes, tax collectors and other such 'sinners'. God has called us to preach a gospel which truly is good news to people struggling in our society, particularly to those on the edge of society. Jesus hung out with the dregs of society and got a name for it- 'friend of sinners'. He hung out with tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes, beggars, Samaritans, uneducated fishermen. How 'incarnational' are we willing to be to reach the lost? Are we willing to identify with the poor? **Jesus came to proclaim Jubilee-Lk 4 v19 'To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD'** 'The acceptable year of the Lord' reminds us of the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:8-55). This was at the end of 7 cycles of 7 years=49 years. Therefore in the 50th year there was to be a special celebration. Its climax was the great Day of Atonement. This was marked by the blowing of trumpets (a ram's horn, shofar).The word 'jubilee' comes from this occasion. The Jewish word is 'yobel' (Jobel) which in turn derives from yobhel, meaning 'ram'. Debts were cancelled and all Hebrew slaves were set free and all land returned to its original owner or owner's family. This was a divine protection over the people of Israel so that poverty would be eradicated. God announced through Isaiah that when the Messiah comes it is like the year of Jubilee. God's social security system for Israel was aimed at eradicating poverty. It says in Deut 15:4 'There should be no poor among you'. However, Israel didn't keep to what God had said and this was one of the reasons for the captivity. However, in Acts they fulfilled it and Luke deliberately uses these words to describe the early Church having no poor among them. If we as Church ceased to be in the community would our community notice it? Does our church being in our community bring the sense of jubilee, good news to our community?
- **The early church modelled it**- they shared possessions, there were no needy people among them. They had a collection and distribution for the widows. Paul started a collection for the poorer churches in Jerusalem during a time of famine.
- I don't agree with **Tony Campolo** on everything, but I think when it comes to

poverty he has a lot of good things to say:

Those issues are biblical issues: to care for the sick, to feed the hungry, to stand up for the oppressed. I contend that if the evangelical community became more biblical, everything would change

Jesus never says to the poor: 'come find the church', but he says to those of us in the church: 'go into the world and find the poor, hungry, homeless, imprisoned.

There are 2,000 verses of Scripture that tell us we must be committed to protecting the poor and the oppressed... There is no concern of Scripture that is addressed so often and so powerfully as reaching out to the poor.

Tony Campolo has once said 'It would be good for you to have a child you sponsored standing up for you on the day of judgement'. We know we are not saved by works, but as James points out- faith is accompanied by works (James 2:14-26).

- **Scriptures on poverty:** Prov 21:13 'If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered'. Prov 14:31 'He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God'. Deuteronomy 7,11 '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. there will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded towards your brothers and toward the poor and needy in the land'. Micah 6:8 'He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' Mercy is one of the 8 key areas of focus for us as a Church and it is thoroughly Biblical- it is part of our mission.
- **Jesus is every person we meet:** Jesus said v35 'I was hungry' etc. We don't know who will come to faith, but we know all who do are Jesus' brothers and sisters, and the way we have treated them is the way we have treated Christ, because they are His family.
- **The U.K is rich in comparison to the rest of the world.** On a ranking of how rich countries are in 2015 the U.K was ranked at position 27 out of 185- i.e. it was the 27th most rich country in the world. The lowest four were Liberia, Malawi, Congo and the poorest Central African Republic. The richest four were Qatar, Luxembourg, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam. (based on Gross domestic product (GDP) based on purchasing-power-parity (PPP) per capita.) Sometimes it is not until someone travels to another country that their eyes are opened to just how poor the rest of the world really is, and just how much we take for granted. One billion children—one out of every two in the world—live in poverty. One hundred and twenty-five million infants who die each week, most from easily-preventable causes. 640 million live without adequate shelter. 400 million have no safe water. 25,000 die every day of hunger and hunger-related causes—one person every 3 ½ seconds, most are children. Band Aid, when 1 film shown of children starving to death everyone suddenly realised what it was all about and shut their mouths and wept. The gospel is good news to the poor (Is 61:1) and that includes the materially poor, not just the comfortable middle-classes. Jesus said when we do something for the least of His children we do it for Him, and that in the great judgement the mercy we have shown in this life will determine our eternal destiny (Matt 25:31-46).

George Müller (1805-1898) had heard that Bristol had very poor sanitation, and soon after Müller arrived, the city was devastated by an epidemic of cholera, and many hundreds of people died. He visited the sick people, trusting God to keep him from catching the disease. So many people had died that there were hundreds of orphans with no-one to care for them; many were reduced to begging in the streets. George Müller wanted to do something to help, and it was this that started his life's work for God. Through the power of prayer, together with action George made a difference. He never once asked anyone for money, but brought his prayer requests to God, and saw answers. In his life he cared for 10,024 orphans. He also established 117 schools which offered Christian education to over 120,000 children, many of them being orphans.

John Wesley. (1703 – 1791 used in the Methodist revival). During his years at Oxford, Wesley was known to give the bulk of the stipend he received from home to the poor. As the leader of the Holy Club, he devoted much of his time and resources visiting and providing for the needs of the imprisoned and poor people of Oxford. He gave away so much of his small income that Wesley's mother, Susanna, was known to have expressed concern for his health and well-being. She was concerned that John was not eating enough because he was giving his money away. John's concern for the poor meant that, along with collecting food, clothing, fuel, and medicine for them, he was among the first to provide them

with the means for lifting themselves out of poverty. First, he established **access to free health care**. Wesley offered free medicines, modern treatments for various ailments, and information on home remedies to people who otherwise would have no access to medical care or were easy prey for quacks. Secondly, Wesley developed a system for **assisting people in finding jobs**. If he could not find employment for someone, Wesley would create work for them. Third, Wesley created a sort of **credit union designed to help the poor out of debt**. In addition to these self-help services, Wesley also provided **educational assistance by teaching people to read and write**; thus increasing their likelihood of achieving self-sufficiency.

- **The unbearable sadness of the Welsh valleys- article released 25th June 2013
BBC News online magazine Mark Easton:**

- The numbers tell a long and sad story of decline. "We are top of every league you don't want to be top of," a man tells me. Poverty, sickness, worklessness - Blaenau's name is always among the worst.
- There are fewer than 60,000 adults in Blaenau Gwent. Each month almost 10,000 prescriptions are issued for anti-depressants. It is a statistic so shocking it is hard to comprehend.
- At a drop-in centre run by the mental health charity Mind in Brynmawr, I meet Bev. She has been on anti-depressants for 15 years. "I can come here for a cry," she tells me.
- Janice first started taking pills for her nerves almost 40 years ago. "When you haven't got the money to go out and even if you could you haven't got the bus fare to go anywhere, the depression sets in," she says.
- The suicide rate in Wales increased by 30% between 2009 and 2011.
- Official figures show that in 2012 more than 8,000 people wanted a job. But there were just 300 vacancies. And most of those were low wage temporary positions.
- A quarter of working-age adults are on benefits - male unemployment is more than double the British average. Among the economically inactive, the students and the homemakers and the sick, a far higher proportion in Blaenau Gwent say they would like employment than across the country as a whole.
- Many of the people of Blaenau Gwent appear to have given up on God. A decade ago less than a quarter of people here said they had no religion - now the census shows it is over 40%.

Blaenau Gwent and this area in particular has had a number of blows over the years:

- The closures of nearby coal mines, ironworks and steelworks.
- The closure of the Dunlop Semtex works.
- The arrival of a supermarket and shopping area outside of the Brynmawr town centre, reducing trade within the town centre itself.
- The closure of the nearby Nantyglo Comprehensive School.
- The closure of the nearby Nantyglo leisure centre.
- The loss of the Brynmawr Comprehensive sixth form.
- Brynmawr Community Centre- still in planning stages but becoming a boxing club.
- A distinct lack of provision for the youth in the area.
- Reduction in Council-funded services.

1. The need for provision of a multi-purpose building facility for Brynmawr:

- The 2008 H.A.R.P report prepared by Blaenau Gwent Borough Council in conjunction with key organisations in the area highlighted a statistic that 35% of

Blaenau Gwent's residents neither own or have access to a car or van, putting Blaenau Gwent considerably below the national average levels.

- There is also the focus on the improvement of the Heads of the Valleys Road to encourage easier access to and through the Valleys region. However, due to the high numbers of people in Blaenau Gwent who have no access to their own transport, many of whom would choose to walk to their nearest town rather than catch a bus to a different town (especially the elderly) there is the need for increased provision of facilities also at a more local level.
- As facilities have improved and increased in Ebbw Vale there have been reductions in facilities in the North Ebbw Fach areas of Brynmawr and Nantyglo, with the closures of Nantyglo Comprehensive, Nantyglo Leisure Centre and Brynmawr School Sixth Form. The Community Centre in Brynmawr is also set to close to become a Boxing Club, thus further reducing local facilities.

Provision of facilities-what we will do:

PROVISION OF A BUILDING FOR THE COMMUNITY (as well as ourselves) - Through the Tabor Centre groups and individuals will be able to hire well equipped, flexible, facilities in their locality which are sustainable over the long term.

All being well the project will start about 6 months from now (once we've confirmed funding).

Our aim for the first three (funded) years of the project:

- Year 1: 8 groups and 12 individuals hire rooms in the building. Year 2: 25 groups and 50 individuals hire rooms in the building. Year 3: 33 groups and 60 individuals hire rooms in the building.
- 65 people in the first year to be actively accessing I.T services in the building such as internet (Wi-Fi throughout), PA. This will increase to 350 people in the second year and 400 people in the third year.
- We plan for the centre to be self-funding by the fourth year without the need for further grants.

2. The need for increased support in difficult financial times:

- Wales Index of Multiple Deprivation 2014. This scale looks at various aspects of deprivation, not only monetary poverty. It shows that out of the whole of Wales Blaenau Gwent has the highest proportion of LSOAs that fall within the 50% 30%, 20% and 10% most deprived (LSOAs are 'lower super output areas'- smaller areas each Borough is comprised of). The results are worse than the same survey performed in 2011 and show a worsening trend.

Need for support- what we will do:

Through Tabor our community will have increased access to support services, decreasing a sense of hopelessness.

- Food Bank-We will open a Food Bank in Tabor which will operate during existing gaps of Monday and Friday mornings and come under the Blaenau Gwent Food Bank providing a distribution point to the people of Brynmawr. In the first year we envisage 54 times when the Food Bank will be accessed by someone in need. In

year two and three this will be about 214 people per year. These are based on existing figures for the catchment area and it will mean those people do not have to travel out of area at these times to access emergency food.

- People requiring specialist help for a variety of areas such as for unmanageable debt, dependency issues, or needing support from social services or psychiatric services will be able to be referred to outside support agencies or seen by outside support agencies using the centre. In the first year we envisage about 50 such referrals or in-house support appointments given, in the second year 210, and in the third year 250.
- We aim to be a catalyst to increasing a sense of hope in our community as people find support through the centre. Numbers indicating in a questionnaire that they have a greater sense of hope for the future after using the centre we are aiming at being 35 in the first year, 130 in the second year and 160 in the third year.

3. The need for engagement:

- Blaenau Gwent has a strong need for increased community engagement. Recent research (National Survey of Wales 2014) has indicated a low sense of belonging within communities in Wales where there is a particularly high level of deprivation. Much of Blaenau Gwent falls into this category, as having the highest levels of deprivation in Wales. In Brynmawr there is no central building acting as a place of social connection and engagement and, therefore, socialisation tends to default to the public houses and nightclubs, promoting a social culture fuelled by alcohol. The young people especially lack structured places to go and many become bored and engage in underage drinking in the local park in the evenings. The elderly similarly complain of isolation, and there is a lack of integration between different age groups. Engagement also affects I.T: the Blaenau Gwent Single Integrated Plan for 2013-2017 made the astonishing claim that 'Almost half of the of the population in Blaenau Gwent are digitally excluded (46%).' -source Blaenau Gwent Single Integrated Plan pg 31

Need for engagement- what we will do:

Through using Tabor people will have a greater level of engagement and increased sense of belonging to their local community

- Numbers of people using the building will be 400 (inc.50 youth) in the first year, 1600 (inc.200 youth) in the second year, 2000 (inc.250 youth) in the third year.
- Numbers of users reporting that they feel less isolated and have a greater sense of belonging to their community will be 25 in the first year, 100 in the second year and 110 in the third year.
- Numbers of people volunteering (both Christians and non-Christians) will be 30 in the first year, 85 in the second year and 95 in the third year.

4. The need for educational, training and self-development opportunities:

- Blaenau Gwent, out of all of Wales, has the highest percentage of a failure to reach the recommended educational levels in all of the key stages at Primary and Secondary education (National Wales Statistics 2013). As a result, there are many who have not developed to their full potential academically, and many who struggle in essential areas such as literacy and numeracy. Conference facilities as training environments could provide an ideal compliment to the existing education provided

by schools, however, Brynmawr itself lacks an appropriate conference facility to gather and cater for a larger groups of people.

Need for learning- what we will do:

Through Tabor people will have an increased access to learning opportunities and skills development in the locality through seminars and workshops run at the centre.

- Numbers of people who access learning opportunities and skills development in the first year we are aiming at 50 people; 200 people in the second year and 220 people in the third year.
- Numbers of unemployed attending Job Club 8-week course (CAP) 20(20 people a week 1x8 wks) in the first year, 80 (20 people a week 4x8 wks) in the second year and 80 (20 people a week 4x8 wks) in the third year.
- Numbers of people attending CAP money management 3-week course- in the first year 15 people (15 people a week 1x3 wks); in the second year 45 people (15 people a week 3x3 wks) and in the third year 45 (15 people a week 3x3 wks).

Application: As well as being stirred up by this sermon would you pray for the project and seriously consider how you can be a part of the project- we need volunteers to train to do CAP Money, CAP job club training and Food Bank training and volunteering.

Summary

I have a dream of a people who minister God's love, help and healing to the lost, poor, sick, forgotten, unloved, bound, abused, and lonely. I dream of a people who speak God's prophetic voice in our community, seeing God's justice established. I dream of a people who feed the hungry and comfort the grieving. A people whose faith is demonstrated by action. A people known as generous, and giving. I dream of a people who have Jesus' compassion for those who are captives and set them free to serve the Lord.

Song:

God of glory, God of power, God of majesty

Rankings on the Wales Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) 2014

