

# That You act Justly

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I share with you this month passages from two Christian thinkers. The first is St John Chrysostom who lived in the latter half of the fourth century. The following, from one of his homilies was preached 1,600 years ago ! It is a wonderfully balanced expression of the teaching of Jesus on our attitude towards the poor and marginalised. Equally, it is a fine example of the unchanging nature of Gospel values down the ages. Like the Gospels themselves, it reads as if it were written yesterday!

St John Chrysostom makes it very clear that reaching out to the poor is not a question of choice, of option - preferential or otherwise. Our choice is whether or not we follow Christ as his disciples. Once that choice is made, reaching out to the poor becomes a Gospel Imperative.

*A reading from the homilies of St John Chrysostom:*

While you adorn the temple, do not despise your brother in distress

Would you honour the body of Christ? Do not despise his nakedness; do not honour him here in church clothed in silk vestments and then pass him by unclothed and frozen outside. Remember that he who said, 'This is my body', and made good his words, also said, 'You saw me hungry and gave me no food', and, 'in so far as you did it not to one of these, you did it not to me'. In the first sense the body of Christ does not need clothing but worship from a pure heart. In the second sense it does need clothing and all the care we can give it.

We must learn to be discerning Christians and to honour Christ in the way in which he wants to be honoured. It is only right that honour given to anyone should take the form most acceptable to the recipient not to the giver. Peter thought he was honouring the Lord when he tried to stop him washing his feet, but this was far from being genuine homage. So give God the honour he asks for, that is, give your money generously to

the poor. God has no need of golden vessels but of golden hearts.

I am not saying you should not give golden altar vessels and so on, but I am insisting that nothing can take the place of almsgiving. The Lord will not refuse to accept the first kind of gift but he prefers the second, and quite naturally, because in the first case only the donor benefits, in the second case the poor get the benefit. The gilt of a chalice may be ostentatious; almsgiving is pure benevolence.

What is the use of loading Christ's table with gold cups while he himself is starving? Feed the hungry and then if you have any money left over, spend it on the altar table. Will you make a cup of gold and withhold a cup of water? What use is it to adorn the altar with cloth of gold hangings and deny Christ a coat for his back! What would that profit you? Tell me: if you saw someone starving and refused to give him any food but instead spent your money on adorning the altar with gold, would he thank you? Would he not rather be outraged? Or if you saw someone in rags and stiff with cold and then did not give him clothing but set up golden columns in his honour, would he not say he was being made a fool of and being insulted?

Consider that Christ is that tramp who comes in need of night's lodging. You turn him away and then start laying rugs on the floor, draping the walls, hanging lamps on silver chains on the columns. Meanwhile the tramp is locked up in prison and you never give him a glance. Well again I am not condemning munificence in these matters. Make your house beautiful by all means but also look after the poor, or rather look after the poor first. Adorn your house if you will, but do not forget your brother in distress. He is a temple of infinitely greater value.

The following is the introduction to the Paul VI memorial lecture given by Gustavo Gutierrez O.P. in Nov 2005. The title of the lecture is "A



Theology for Today", and this extract is printed by the kind permission of Cafod.

I would like to begin by recalling a well known and challenging parable from the Gospel of Luke. It consists of just two sentences "*There was a rich man... At his gate lay a poor person...*" (Luke 16:19-20)

I think this is the situation today - the poor nations are lying next to the rich nations, and the rich nations largely ignore them. I would like to make three brief comments about this parable and compare it to our own situation.

Firstly, the poor today are not only lying at the door of the rich countries, They are pushing at the door as a result of their poverty and an absence of work in their own countries, risking their lives, leaving their families, accepting that they may be under threat of expulsion. Migration is certainly a very big phenomenon today, and as human being, as Christians, we must deal with this question, and, to some extent we can say that, it is only just beginning.

My second point is a little different. In Luke's Gospel, the poor man has a name – Lazarus, the rich man does not. There are few names in the parables, and in the Gospels in general.,

The poor people are anonymous; they work and die without leaving any footprints in history. The biblical reversal of social structures is one of the characteristics of the Gospel of Luke. But it could also be a challenge for us, a sign of our commitment to the poor, to eliminate people's anonymity.

Thirdly, I have a great respect for people who use the expression 'to be the voice of the voiceless'. At the same time, I have some difficulties with this expression, beautiful though it is, because I think our goal must be to help them obtain a voice; my intention is not to be the voice of the voiceless, as the poor themselves have a voice. We must direct our efforts and commitment towards this end.

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