



# Who are the poor in the life of Jesus?

DAVID MCLOUGHLIN

Emeritus Fellow in Christian Theology, Newman University, Birmingham.

The Galilee of Jesus was divided by tensions of a structural nature: social, political and economic; Jews/Gentiles, rulers/ruled, rich/poor. This was the result of two imposed rules – the kingdom of Herod and the reign of Rome. When Jesus preached a different kingdom he found eager ears among the mass of the people. But he also inevitably provoked serious concern in those who had vested interests in maintaining the other two ‘kingdoms’!<sup>1</sup>

## The land, the rich and the poor

The greater part of traditional first-century Galilean economics depended on agriculture and fishing. The majority of the population were peasant farmers who lived at subsistence level or below. If they lost the essential resources for life, they became destitute and often enslaved as the state had little interest in helping the poor.

Ownership of the land was a key element, as indeed it remains in any peasant society. However, in first-century Palestine there was the added religious significance that the land was primordially God’s gift to Israel and so belonged ultimately to God alone and to the Jewish people as God’s chosen tenants.

The archaeological findings in Galilee show a gradual shift from smallholdings to the emergence of vast centralised estates such as the ones north of the city of Sepphoris.<sup>2</sup> If, in time of drought or famine, a family fell into debt, their land could be forfeited with brutal consequences. Hence, estates grew and tenancy increased, with farmers being charged rent by the wealthy, ruling elite.

Large construction projects, such as the one at Sepphoris, also provided employment for craftsmen such as stonemasons or carpenters (although there was little wood in Palestine). As a local *tekton* (craftsman), it is possible Jesus worked on the building project at Sepphoris. Such projects were, of course, partly funded by the revenue collected through the tax system.

The people of Galilee were subject to a complex system of religious and secular taxation. This included various duties on produce – Josephus tells how the village around Gischala had to pay part of its harvest in imperial taxes.<sup>3</sup> Although we do not have enough information available to calculate how much the average Galilean would have paid in tax, it is likely to have been a very significant financial burden, especially when the harvest failed.

In addition, Jews were also required by the Jerusalem Temple authorities to pay tithes and offerings to the Temple and the priesthood. Jewish males over the age of 20 were also liable to pay the Temple tax, which was approximately equivalent to one day's wages a year for the majority of the population, although it is not clear whether, in Jesus's day, this tax was compulsory or voluntary.<sup>4</sup>

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## The parables of the alternative kingdom

So the reality of economic life in Jesus' day was that the masses were dominated by a wealthy and powerful elite. The religious leaders imposed an ideology that legitimated the status quo. This was the great tradition of the national myth. At its heart was an emphasis on ritual purity and the following of all the sabbath laws; this was the sign of a true child of Abraham.

John the Baptist railed against this legitimised corruption of the national myth in his preaching:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

(Luke 3.7–9, NRSV)

Jesus confronts this elitist use of Abraham in the 'great tradition' and subverts it in the parable of Dives and Lazarus, which we will look at in a moment. Jesus picks up on what some scholars call the 'little tradition', the oral tradition of the illiterate peasants. This echoes the protests of the prophets and the underlying trust in God's covenant with creation.

Jesus tried to break the negative picture imposed on his hearers by those who controlled them, and which they partly

internalised. He wanted to sharpen and deepen what his hearers already knew. In doing so, Jesus was awakening them to areas of their faith that had been underplayed or forgotten. He was giving them back their own history, a sense of themselves under God – but not the God they had access to via the manipulation of Jerusalem's Temple authorities, rather the creator who was as close to them as a beloved Abba, and who established them as beloved children.

The parables were intended to provoke discussion and conversation, and raise awareness of different injustices. They were the starting point of a process, not the end. They provided listeners to a possible shared 'light-on' moment which could then have further consequences. If a group saw the implication of a parable then they saw their world differently and had a choice to make – whether to stay with the way things were or to step out into this new 'kingdom' way of looking at things.

*Dives and Lazarus: the filthy rich and the dirt poor (Luke 16.19–31)*

Here we have a representative of the powerful in the land, dressed in purple clothes which cost a fortune and imply a royal or imperial official, whose fine cotton is imported, then as now, at great cost from Egypt. Lazarus, meanwhile, is described as *ptokōs* – destitute, corpse-like, almost carrion for the wild dogs. Although, in fact, it is the dogs alone who are kind to him, licking the sores that are the result of malnutrition. The difference between the two protagonists could not be greater, and to underline this Jesus emphasises the great gate that keeps Lazarus excluded (whose name ironically means 'God helps'). If only the gate had been open, then everything would have been different. The rich man dies and is buried with honour.

Up to now we have the great tradition's view of the order of things. However, Jesus continues the story and the order unravels. Now in paradise, like a privileged dinner guest Lazarus reclines on the breast of Father Abraham and Dives is in torment in Hades (not Hell, but the place where you await the resurrection and learn the lessons you should have learned in life).

But what has Dives learnt? He asks Abraham to command Lazarus to bring him water but Abraham reminds him of his life and that this is the consequence. There is a play here between the gate Dives could have opened at any time to have comforted Lazarus and the great gulf that now separates them.

## NOTES

1. JD Crossan & JL Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the stones, behind the texts* (London: SPCK, 2001), pp. 51–97.

2. As mentioned by Josephus in his *Vita*. Situated on the shores of the Sea of Galilee within walking distance of Nazareth, Sepphoris was rebuilt by Herod Antipas and bore all the hallmarks of sophisticated Hellenistic culture, such as temples and theatres. As the capital of Galilee it was an important administrative and economic centre for the region. Cf Josephus, reference to the courts of debtors in his *Antiquities of the Jews*. 14.91. See G Theissen & A Merz, *The historical Jesus: A comprehensive guide* (London: SCM, 1998), p. 165.

3. Theissen & Merz, *Historical*, p. 166.

4. Cf. Matthew 17.24–27 which suggests Jesus voluntarily paid the tax.

5. Cf. Isaiah 1.16–17; 5.7; Jeremiah 5.23–29; 21.11–14; Amos 2.6–11; 5.10–24 and Micah 3.1–3, 9–12.

6. See RA Horsley, *Jesus and the powers: Conflict, covenant and the hope of the poor* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2011).



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Next Dives asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers so they can avoid his fate. Abraham points out that they already have all they need in the teaching of Moses. Again, notice how Dives speaks of Lazarus – as an insignificant slave. He has learnt nothing. Then there is that extraordinary, ironic sentence, 'If someone goes to them from the dead they will repent.' Abraham's retort is that if they have ignored Moses and the prophets, who spoke God's word, why would they listen to one who is resurrected?

Throughout this parable, Abraham seeks Dives, recognition of Lazarus as an equal child of God. The language he uses of Dives is *teknon* (child) and Dives indeed calls Abraham *pater* (father), but he remains within his own class and family consciousness. He only cares about his brothers. He cannot see Lazarus as a child of Abraham and therefore as his brother, which is the teaching of the Torah. The land is for all, its produce must not be hoarded but shared, so that even the widow, the stranger and the orphan have enough (Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15.1–18).

In telling this story Jesus places himself squarely in the prophetic tradition that condemned the exploitation of earlier generations of kings and oppressive royal officials.<sup>5</sup> It also reveals how class and family interests within the new economy have undermined the sense of solidarity of the people.

The parable gives the people a way of interpreting the two-tiered society of the time with Herod and the elite landowners in Galilee and the aristocratic priesthood in Jerusalem and Judaea. That such a great divide could have opened up between the rich and the poor is the direct result of serious interest on loans, of high taxation and their consequences. The parables open up the reality, but they also provoke thought – what could make a difference?

In this parable Jesus allows Abraham to be the teacher. What is required is the re-establishment of a sense of mutuality, of fundamental relationship or kinship. Without this it is possible for the rich to continue to exploit the poor, seizing land and building great estates through the manipulation of debt (Roman imperial policy of *latifundia*). The shared space that the people of God all once inhabited as Israel had been undermined and re-interpreted. The poor are to believe this is God's will and, indeed, blessing.

Jesus tells the story to unravel the situation – the destitute on the street become the honoured guests at the heavenly banquet. How

is this possible? Either something is wrong here or something is wrong in the afterlife. The story is strange since it includes the ordinary everyday world, a beggar at the door, with the world of the elite super-rich who are not part of the everyday – but in telling this story Jesus' listeners begin to see the relationship between the stellar wealth of the minority super-rich and the growing poverty of the masses. They have an insight into what might change things – a rediscovery and re-embracing of the vision of kinship and hospitality of Moses and the prophets. It is particularly fitting that Jesus should have used Abraham, whom the elite had used as the symbol of their class and its ethnic purity, and, who in a certain sense legitimated their rule (Luke 3.7–9). However, in Jesus' story, Abraham is now the one who restores true kinship and hospitality to the destitute (Luke 13.28–29).

**Jesus draws on the experience of the people, provoking them to see their world clearly but from a renewed perspective**

*Workers in the vineyard: Solidarity lost and oppression revealed (Matthew 20.1–16)*

Here we have day labourers: some of whom would have been smallholders trying to implement their subsistence living; some landless and destitute without the support of extended family or local community; some would be wandering and so strangers to the locals – so here we have differing working groups vying with each other for limited work. Any sense of solidarity and identity has long gone. Normally it would be a steward hiring them, as the landowners tended to live in the new cities and had little to do with the day to day running of the estate, but Jesus deliberately includes the owner here to again make the link between those at the top of society and those at the base. The normally invisible elite are here made present and, as such, accountable.<sup>6</sup>

They are harvesting grapes and the harvest is a bumper one. The owner must harvest at the optimum moment for the fruit and so goes back again and again to the marketplace until he has enough labour to bring in the harvest. The owner offers the first group a denarius, a reasonable amount, but not generous, for a

day's work – enough to keep a small family fed and housed. When the owner comes back he just tells the next group to go to work and he will give them what is right. There is no negotiation. The next group is told to go, without any reference to pay. Similarly, the last group are told to go for just one hour. Throughout this process the landowner has total control.

The owner tells his steward to pay them in reverse but orders him to give them all a denarius rather than a proportion of the daily wage equivalent to their hours. The owner is playing with their dependency on him. It is a gesture of contempt; an insult implying those who have worked all day are no more valuable than those who have worked for an hour. So shaming is the insult that the workers protest. If they do not protest then the value of their work in the marketplace is undermined and, implicitly, they are accepting the owner's right to pay less the next time and rumours will spread to other potential employers.

Note, the owner does not address the group. Rather, he makes an example of one labourer, 'I do you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?' It is as though there had been a mutually agreed contract. Then the owner expels the labourer: 'Take what is yours and go.' He is sacked. He will not be hired again. The seemingly generous boss is revealed as something quite different. He is cynical and manipulative.

The owner then turns to the group and gives his justification: 'I choose to give to this last what I give to you first lot.' The money is now his gift, no longer a wage earned. He says their complaint is evil in response to his goodness (literally 'is your eye evil because I am good?'). He speaks as though the land is his and he controls its fruit and profit. However, the Torah teaches the land is God's and God alone distributes it to the people of the land. The Torah demands redistribution in times of need and condemns hoarding for profit. Even the denarius he so generously gives is a subsistence wage.

Jesus' story takes his listeners into the heart of the covenant and its liberation. It heightens the perversion of the covenant by the powerful rich but it also shows up the lack of solidarity among the poor themselves – the rich man can isolate one worker and silence their initial protest. The debate after this parable must have gone on a long time.

Note, again, what Jesus is doing in these parables. He is drawing on the experience of the people, provoking them to see their world clearly but from a renewed perspective, 'the

kingdom of God' and inviting them to become subjects of their own history. Jesus empowers the exploited and oppressed to reclaim their history, to see it anew and to participate in creating it.

## Conclusion

There is a danger when we read these texts in church that we spiritualise them and tend to take away a personal message – what do they mean for me? Then we miss their call to renew our collective vision of a creation under God. We are all of equal worth and should demonstrate solidarity in service. Rather than accumulation for profit and personal security, the distribution and sharing of the goods of the earth should be at the centre of our collective concern. Above all, these are texts that should provoke collective reflection, discussion and debate, starting from the conflicted reality we find ourselves in.

It is always dangerous when such texts become the texts of an elite – the ordained, bishops, theologians, et al. – because then they can too easily be co-opted into other great traditions that often have little to say to the reality in which the mass of the people find themselves. It is always a risk when the community of the Kingdom of God finds common cause with a political plan – as in the Big Society or a trickle-down economy.

As the old saying goes: when you sup with the devil you need a long spoon.