

From England

THE POOR ARE ALWAYS WITH YOU - A SIDEWAYS VIEW OF LONDON

by **Nicholas Holtam**

I am a London parish priest. I read theology at King's College London, was ordained in St Paul's Cathedral in 1979 and served as a curate in Stepney. After teaching in Lincoln for five years I came back to East London to be Vicar of the Isle of Dogs from 1988-95. Just before we moved to the Island, the master build agreement was signed for Canary Wharf and the top of the spire of Christ Church blew off in a hurricane. In September 1993 a British National Party Councillor was elected for nine months in Millwall Ward and the Isle of Dogs gained notoriety for racism and as a nationally recognised example of a poor community that had got left behind within the development of London's Docklands.

When I announced we would be moving to St Martin-in-the-Fields there were three quite distinct reactions from the church congregation. The professional incomers said, 'That's a good move' with the unspoken implication, 'How did you get that?' People from the Commonwealth, their eyes misty with tears, said, 'That is the church we knew before we came to London' (because of St Martin's broadcasting on the BBC World Service). But the reaction of nearly all the East Enders was, 'Where? Where did he say he was going?' For many people, especially poorer people, London does not function as a single city. People stick to their patch, where they are comfortable. Many people on the Isle of Dogs at that time didn't even go into the new developments because they weren't for them. But neither did they perceive the centre of London as for them. They thought that by coming to the West End I was going upmarket and leaving them behind.

In a sense they were right. The conspicuous wealth of the West End is evident and St Martin's is the Royal parish church and the parish church of Downing Street and of the government offices in Whitehall. But the truth is that I moved up and downmarket in one move. St Martin's is also the parish of

many who are homeless and who come to the centre of London to get lost or to be found. The Connection at St Martin's sees about 7,000 different people a year – young people at risk as well as older people who are street homeless, or at risk of street homelessness.

St Martin-in-the-Fields, in a way that typifies the best of English parish churches, is a big, broad, inclusive and open community. I am going to come back to this as a model community in which we find ourselves in relation to our neighbours but I want to begin by looking at poverty in our city.

A sideways view

Most of us look at poverty sideways. As a parish priest, I am not poor but I have sat alongside poor people in a variety of contexts. Sitting beside, I have a sideways view at poverty.

Have you noticed that people rarely look directly at a street beggar? We tend to be uncertain or embarrassed and look out of the corner of our eye. We are unsettled by poverty, or by the challenge of a beggar, or by our inability to know what adequately to do. That's a sideways view of poverty as well.

To this the Christian Gospel is a daily challenge, and the story of St Martin himself exemplifies it. Martin was a Roman soldier in the fourth century. On a cold winter's day, when riding out of the gate of Amiens in northern France, Martin saw a beggar cold and naked. He cut his cloak in two and gave half to the beggar. That night in a dream the beggar returned to him in a dream as Christ, in an echo of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel: 'For as much as you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me'. So the Christian has an expectation of meeting Christ particularly in the poor, the marginal, the outcast and of receiving strangers as if they were Christ. Only sometimes has this been my experience. The daily round of difficult people is pretty grinding. One of my predecessors, Austen Williams, who had a reputation as a pastor and a listener, told a story against himself. He was rushing between church and the vicarage when a man accosted him. 'Remember me?' said the man. Austen, late and in a hurry, asked 'How much do you want?' The crushed man replied, 'I only wanted to know that you remember me'. There is a Christian duty to listen to poor people especially because the Kingdom of God seems to be very near in them, perhaps because they have least to lose in maintaining the status quo of our society.

This is not easy either, because poor people are curiously invisible. They often see things slant, are not easy to hear or interpret, and can be as unreasonable, or more so, as anyone else. Yet they also often see things clearly in a way that some others who have more to lose do not.

The work with homeless people typically begins with the very basic provision: feeding, washing, clothing, and providing a place of safety and warmth. In this context it is possible to build relationships of trust and gain confidence. Homelessness is never a single issue. The people who come to us have been affected by the breakdown of relationships, unemployment, mental illness, addictions and debilitating poverty as well as by not having a home. It can be a slow process for many of the people we see have been badly damaged. A few years ago, one man slept on the south side of church and came to Morning Prayer every day for months. When he eventually spoke he said, very slowly, 'If you haven't spoken for a long time, you can't find the words'.

The task is not just to sustain people in these circumstances, though that is important, but to help people gain self-confidence, a sense of their own worth and of having some control over their circumstances. The life-changing work happens 1 to 1 or in groups. We have a resettlement group where people learn to shop, budget and cook, the sort of life skills most of us take for granted. There are groups for people with particular needs such as alcohol or drug addictions. But surprisingly it's the education programme, sport (particularly for the youngsters), and the music, art and creative writing groups where extraordinary things happen.

The dimensions of poverty in London

There is an interesting difference between the Beatitudes in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. In Matthew Jesus speaks his Sermon on the Mount, whereas in Luke it is given on the level, the Sermon on the Plain. In Matthew Jesus says, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 5.3), but in Luke he says much more directly, 'Blessed are *you* who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Lk 6.20).

There is considerable interest in redefining our wealth, and also therefore our poverty, more widely than in economic terms. So part of me would like to explore the meaning Matthew's being 'poor in spirit's in London

today? The Greater London Authority draft cultural strategy strikes me as poor in spirit and I don't see it as a blessing. How can our city's cultural strategy be a spirituality-free zone in which the discussion of values is pathetically restricted to 'value for money'? We, not just the GLA, have so lost confidence in religious belief and language that we do not know how to discriminate between good religion and bad. At best we accept a broad and uncritical tolerance – there are many paths up the mountain, so if that's what you believe and it doesn't harm anyone else that's fine by me. At worst we descend into ignorant bigotry to defend our own religious tribe. In a world where religion frequently demonstrates its capacity to be lethal we would do well to rediscover an ability to be critical and discerning in matters of the spirit.

In one modern translation of the Bible this beatitude reads, 'How blessed are those who know their need of God'. That's much more like it to my mind. Without God there is a poverty of spirit. The blessing is not in the emptiness but in the realisation of our emptiness, knowing our need of God. That's much too important a task to be left to our churches, synagogues, temples and mosques and it is a pity that the Greater London Authority's draft cultural strategy ducks it.

But for today, let's stick to material poverty. It is difficult to know whether the best descriptions are statistics or stories. How do we define who is poor? In the 1980's one of the congregation on the Isle of Dogs was affronted by the report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas (Faith in the City). It listed some of the indicators of poverty and included having an outside toilet. She said, 'Who says? My husband always thought it was unhealthy when they put the toilet inside the house'. So there is an element of subjectivity here.

Government works on an objective definition of poverty when households have less than 60 per cent of the national average disposable income. Why 60 per cent is a matter of subjective or political judgement about the level below which people lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and live in conditions that are widely thought to be necessary in our society.

Our national assumptions are that there is much less poverty in prosperous London than, say, in Wales, Northern Ireland and the North-East. The GLA has identified that if housing costs and child care are added to our fixed outgoings the proportion of households in inner London with less than 60 per cent of the average disposable income is an astonishing 53 per cent, far higher than for any of the regions. In Kensington the average household income is £47,700 p.a., the highest in the country. In Tower Hamlets, my old Borough, 61 per cent of households have an income less than £9,000 p.a. This affects everything: health and morbidity as well as educational achievement and the general sense of well being.

If that is not your experience and you want to know what that feels like, read Polly Toynbee's *Hard Work: Life in Low-Pay Britain* (Bloomsbury 2003). She and a number of other well known figures were challenged by Church Action on Poverty to live just for the six weeks of Lent in 2002 on what was then the minimum wage of £4.10 an hour. Her experience of how things cost much more when you lack the financial ability to exercise choice, and of quickly getting into debt, is salutary. Or look at the adverts in the Sun or Mirror; there is often more than a page of lenders offering unsecured loans at ridiculous interest rates.

In a residential community in East London, on estates adjacent to the Isle of Dogs Enterprise Zone, there were households with three generations unemployed, and people whose isolation was compounded by their poverty. That the eradication of child poverty is one of the government's stated objectives is very much to the government's credit yet it is an extremely difficult target to achieve.

The current advertising campaign by Barnardo's has produced a furore. The first showed a new-born baby with a cockroach crawling out of his mouth. Another featured a baby with a methylated spirits bottle in its mouth. A third showed a baby with a syringe. The headline said: 'There are no silver spoons for children born into poverty.' If poor people in general are invisible in the places of power and wealth this publicity is a good thing. The campaign was designed to emphasise two things. First, the extent of child poverty in Britain today: Barnardo's claim that 3.9 million children live in poverty, a higher figure than for any other country in the European Union. Second it emphasised that poverty is repeated from generation to generation and is difficult to escape.

Mind the gap

Of course, because the definition of poverty is relative, it is a truism that the poor will always be with us. Yet as a society we are obsessed with the other end of the scale. How many of us read the Sunday Times Rich List? Earlier in the summer I saw a vagrant lying in front of an Evening Standard billboard proclaiming: 'Chris Evans £7million pay out'. There is a proper and growing concern about the gap between the richest and poorest. The obscene stories of rich footballers frittering their money sometimes beggar belief, as with the East European footballer who allegedly boasted of standing in front of a beggar burning money to emphasise the gap between them.

On the Isle of Dogs in the early 1990's some of the new private estates not only retained sections of the old dock walls to divide them from the neighbouring council estates, but also added barbed wire to the top to make sure that people couldn't climb across. A Black South African friend said it looked like 'economic apartheid'.

A great thing about the Docklands development was the energy and inward investment it brought. Some people in the business community really wanted to help make improvements for the local residential community. The London Docklands Development Corporation itself sponsored a number of initiatives to improve local schools but sometimes the gap in experience was very telling. In the late 1980's the primary school at which I was Chair of Governors received a gift of computers, one for each classroom. The computers were delivered before the LDDC realised they would also have to pay for a second electrical socket to be provided in each classroom if the gifts were going to be useful.

There is a great deal of concern about 'City Fat Cats' who are paid salaries and bonuses out of all proportion to the rest of us. One of the difficulties with Docklands is the juxtaposition of conspicuous wealth alongside (mostly in parallel with and therefore looking sideways at and not connecting with) some of the poorest in Britain.

On 19 October *The Observer* carried a fascinating article by Nick Cohen headlined 'A tale of two cities'. It described this year's HSBC AGM in which The East London Community Organisation (TELCO) confronted the

bank's chairman, Sir John Bond, with a demand to pay a living wage to the bank's cleaners. Apparently the cleaners are paid £5 an hour and TELCO were pressing for £6.50. Abdul Durrant, the cleaner who made the case for TELCO, was said to supplement his wages with a second cleaning job and by minicabing at weekends. It is easy to feel the force of his case.

Sir John Bond responded by emphasising the importance of the principle of the market rate for the job. In other words, even a firm as big as HSBC operates within a market and is not free to do whatever it wants. It has to survive against the competition. Sir John emphasised HSBC's outstanding record of charitable giving. At which point the Roman Catholic Bishop of Brentwood shouted out, 'We don't want your charity, we want justice'.

The bishop's moral force is striking, but the right is not all on his side. There is much to be said in favour of socially responsible capitalism. If HSBC fails they will not be able to pay salaries let alone make charitable donations. As a student I was struck by a letter from Karl Marx written in the early 1870's to J M Ludlow, the parliamentary draftsman of much of the legislation that enabled the co-operative movement in the 1850's. In it Marx said that the process of liberal change in England was such that there would not be a revolution here as had happened elsewhere in Europe. This is a very English model of change.

London has some very significant examples of socially responsible capitalism - like London First, Business in the Community, The Prince's Foundation. St Martin-in-the-Fields is preparing for a £34 million buildings renewal. It is much needed, long overdue and will equip St Martin's to serve London through the twenty-first century. In July we received an in principle agreement to a grant of £14.69 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund and we now have £19.8 million pledged or raised, so just have another £14.2 million still to go. One aspect of this project is to create excellent facilities for the poorest of the poor in the heart of London. It's not the cheapest place to do so but poor people gravitate to the centre of the capital. The poor will always be with us and it is better for London as a whole if we plan to include them, as they cannot be designed out.

We could not have got this project to birth if our neighbours, especially our business neighbours, had not given us a very great deal of charitable

help. None has tried to impose conditions on their giving, and I assume donors expect us to continue not just to care for the poor but also to give voice to the poor. There is something very healthy about a society that supports, pays for and engages in the necessary conflict that is involved in the process of liberal change.

Values and Vision

I visited an old lady in hospital at the end of her life. Day after day I went and if the doctors or nurses were doing something I would be asked to wait until they had finished. Then one day the doctor made way for me and I knew she would die that day. I think it's for this reason I am always anxious when government rediscovers the importance of religion.

In Docklands, the LDDC made community development a priority only after they had been in existence more than five years and had done a great deal to destroy the community that was there. I remember a conversation with an LDDC officer in 1988 in which he described the Isle of Dogs as a 'brown field site'. The problem with this from my perspective was that more than 12,000 people lived there!

The churches generally seem pleased that government has acknowledged the significance of faith communities whereas I am concerned both about what that implies about the breakdown of community and also because I am less sure than most church leaders about our ability to deliver what is being asked of us. The Connection at St Martin's has won the street team contract for working with homeless people in our patch. The task is to eradicate sleeping on the streets but is that a realistic goal and what will happen if we fail? National and local government policy in relation to street homelessness is a not very edifying mix of carrot and stick.

Churches are communities of people committed to the love of God and the love of neighbour. What churches can offer is a model of community, which demonstrates we belong together and which gets us beyond looking at each other sideways. At their best churches are inclusive communities where people meet across social boundaries. One of my most memorable days at St Martin-in-the-Fields was seven years ago when I walked the youngest of our children to school in Soho and as we crossed Leicester Square one of the drunks shouted out, 'F... off Vicar'. I cycled up to The Council of

Christians and Jews on the Euston Road for a meeting with a RC nun and a rabbi. Then cycled to The Dorchester Hotel – they didn't know what to do with my bike! - to say Grace at a lunch President Mandela was giving the Queen and 300 others during his State visit, and in the afternoon went out to Wormwood Scrubs to visit a friend in prison.

That range of social experience is very unusual. People also experience it on the annual Pilgrimage from St Martin's to Canterbury. On the Friday of the late May Bank Holiday weekend about 70 people set off from the steps of St Martin's. Over the course of the weekend others join them along the way. By the time we reach Canterbury cathedral on Monday afternoon the number has grown to about 140. Sleeping on village hall floors, travelling light without the sorts of possessions that separate us and make it clear which social group we belong to, and walking 75 miles is like climbing Everest for some of us so we need to help each other to make sure we arrive together.

In my first year I was walking with two men both in jeans and T shirt, absorbed in conversation as we walked through the Kent fields. Only after more than an hour did I discover that one was a university professor and one would be back on the streets that night having had his weekend's holiday. Ask anyone who becomes part of the St Martin's community and they will say that one of the things they value most about it is this sort of experience of community. None of us live simply as individuals. We exist only in relationship and the longing for community is a very deep one.

By extension, our work with homeless people in the twentieth century was originally funded by the BBC Christmas Appeal. The very first church service ever broadcast came from St Martin-in-the-Fields on 6th January 1924. Twice a year for the next three years the vicar would invite the extended congregation to give to the collection. Lord Reith decided this needed to be regularised and so The Weeks' Good Cause was born and every year since 1927 the Vicar of St Martin's has been allowed to make a Christmas Appeal (BBC Radio 4 Sunday 7th December 7.53am). It is an extraordinary event with volunteers on the phones for the day and a small team of mostly elderly people opening the post for about three weeks. Last year raised a miraculous £486,000, which is divided between our work in Trafalgar Square and a Relief Fund that this year has helped more than 2,000 people in need across

the country. This Appeal is a marvellous example of about 7,000 listeners to Radio 4 responding to the needs of their neighbours.

Recently I was struck by a verse in Luke's Gospel in which Jesus said:

'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.'
(Luke 22. 24)

There is a great deal to be thankful for about charity and benefactors in our city. That well of human kindness is what the daily work of organisations like St Martin-in-the-Fields depends on. Yet that vision of the kingdom of God gives something further to aim for which unsettles us in the present because it addresses the power relationships between us. The kingdom of God is a community in which we deal with our neighbour face to face and move beyond that sideways look at each other which is uncertain and shifty and typical of the way we currently look at poverty.

A version of this paper was delivered as a lecture at Gresham College, London, on 24 November 2003.

Nicholas Holtam is the Vicar at St Martin-in-the-Fields, Trafalgar Square, London