

## Are All The Poor Deserving?

### Undeserving Poor?

Many Christians and others have questioned the idea that the poor do not deserve our help, and related ideas which seem to be current (and were particularly so in earlier times, when a distinction was made – now often considered wrong – between the poor who do indeed deserve our help, and the poor who don't).

This approach, and these questionings, come at a time when, in the Church of England in particular (and especially under the commendations and influence of Archbishop Justin Welby) Christians are being committed to and urged to support – organise, and contribute to – the establishment, stocking, and operating of food banks. It seems to me that there is little in the formative Christian writings, or in those of its Judaic precursor, which commends anything other than an extremely positive attitude towards the poor, and service to the poor (many references could be given to the words of Jesus, or of the psalms or words of the ancient prophets); thus, it is right and proper that we have a strong desire to assist the poor, call for the removal of poverty, and vigorously support such as the food bank initiatives. And yet ... there is still something about the words of Archbishop Welby and other church leaders that leaves me slightly uncomfortable.

The source of this unease, after some thought, is this: to every story, there is another side, and to every argument, a counter-argument, whether we readily wish to acknowledge it or not. Perhaps there actually *are* people in our society who do not deserve the assistance they get, and perhaps those other Biblical words (“ ... if any would not work, neither should he eat.” (2 Thessalonians, 3: 10)) should be read to mean “If a person who is able to work refuses to do so, preferring to acquire the assistance of others, such a person is undeserving of sustenance and support”. It could be argued that since support for such people generally comes from the taxes of those who do indeed work, then the act of taking money from them to support those who chose to be idle is actually immoral; theft, by the State, from working people in order to aid the indolent.

Of course, this depends on if such people, if such a situation, exists. Often we read reports which refer to people in Britain who live, in comparative idleness, off the state (that is, off the earnings of others who do work). Of course, it is argued that such people are very few, and also, much scorn and doubt is cast upon the sources of information about them, and the motives of those who produce such reports. No doubt such people – the indolent - are indeed few, very few perhaps; but they still exist it seems, and working people are made to support them.

What worries me is that our church leaders rarely seem to refer to the existence of such people, or this situation, and concentrate their rhetoric solely on the parlous situation of the very poor (who also may be small in number). Of course – I have acknowledged already – our church leaders are absolutely right to publicise the situation of the poor, to galvanise church members to aid them in any way they can (such as organising food banks), and to harry and harass the political leaders who perhaps allow poverty to continue, by way of their policies.

What is wrong is that the other side of the coin is seemingly never referred to; the result of this very unfortunate fact is that the message of the church leaders – and hence their areas of concern, their

beliefs and values – is perceived to be one-sided, unbalanced, and biased against a whole portion of the community, the small people who, while not having fallen so low as to merit state assistance, may still live on a very narrow margin between their earnings – often, very hard-gained – and expenses. Not for such as these the comforts of the middle-class “liberal”, who seemingly often constitutes the class that produces senior clergy.

There is what might be called a lower-lower middle class in our society, I fancy, who draw little state assistance, but work hard to pay their way; they are often among the much-despised *Daily Mail* and tabloid readership, perhaps, also, the UKIP votership, and it is so easy for them to perceive that church leaders, and occupants of the moral high ground, have little time for them. Our church leaders, it can often seem, are not very concerned to dispel their own image of being mostly bearded lefties, the *Guardian* readership at prayer, or to reveal their ability to appreciate the feelings of those whose concerns are not immediately their own.

Of course, if there indeed are in our society, as we often read, people who live very well off the state, then they’re not undeserving *poor*, because they’re probably not *poor*.

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