**James 2.1-17; Mark 7.24-37 Ministering to the poor.**

Think back to your high school days for a moment. I’m sure if you trolled through your memories, there would be a mix of pleasant and not so pleasant memories. Often, people’s unpleasant memories of high school will centre around the issue of acceptance – or lack of it - by one’s peers.

I wasn’t very sporty at school, so I wasn’t part of the really ‘cool’ group of kids. The cool kids were those in the A grade sports teams. The girls wore their box pleated uniforms hitched high over their belts; they died their hair and shaved their legs. One of the worst punishments our school guidance counsellor devised was to confiscate a girl’s belt if her tunic was considered too short. Very mean. And the cool boys were of course all bronzed surfie types.

Though I wasn’t part of the ‘in’ crowd, I did have a group of good friends I hung around with, so I was content. But I remember one girl in our class who was big and frumpy, and sadly, had a crooked eye. That poor girl wasn’t accepted in any of the cliques. She ended up hanging around with our group, but she was always on the fringe. It was because she was different. She was insecure and shy, because her life at school was all about being excluded.

Jesus’ teaching was considered revolutionary because he preached inclusion in a culture that was very good at practising exclusion. People were excluded if they were considered ‘unclean’ through breaking the Jewish law. People were excluded if they were disabled. People were excluded if they were poor. People were excluded if they were women.

Did you know that there was a blessing that Jewish men would say as part of their daily morning ritual that went something like this? “I thank you Lord God, that you have not made me a Gentile, a slave or a woman.”

Jesus’ attitude of compassion for the poor, both in his teaching and in his example, was what caused so much angst on the part of the scribes and Pharisees. It was counter-cultural!

When we look at our readings today, we find that they are all about inclusion, particularly with regard to the poor.

The reading from Proverbs puts the rich and the poor on the same footing in God’s eyes. Pro 22:2 “Rich and poor have this in common: The LORD is the Maker of them all.” And again in v22-23 Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the LORD will take up their case and will plunder those who plunder them.

Then if we move to the Epistle reading, we find James exhorting his readers not to show favouritism. From what James says, we can assume that in the early gatherings of believers, they found it hard to shed a lifetime of Jewish conditioning. When a rich believer came into their meeting, they were inclined to honour that person. They’d grown up being taught that riches were a sign of God’s blessing. And because poverty meant you had displeased God they were equally inclined to relegate the poor person to a lowly place in the meeting.

James points out that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and enter his kingdom, just as much as anyone else. He then really lays it on the line, saying, 2:8 “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbour as yourself," you are doing right. If you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.” He goes further, saying that if they break this part of the law, they’re are guilty of breaking the lot! You get the sense that James is burning with the righteous indignation of God about this.

James continues to exhort them, saying that if their faith is genuine, it will show itself in action. Jas 2:15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

We would do well to pause here and consider whether there is anything in these verses which we need to apply to ourselves.

There are different kinds of poverty, aren’t there? Monetary poverty is one kind. But there are other types of as well.

* There is educational poverty. There are many folk who haven’t had the benefit of a full education – particularly in rural and low socio economic areas and among our Koori communities, and who consequently are destined to earn the minimum wage, or live on Centrelink benefits – or less. Some people don’t have sufficient education to deal with Centrelink!
* There is poverty with regard to relationships – people who have grown up without adequate nurture; people who are damaged by neglect and abuse; people who are without family; people who are isolated by age or illness.
* There is poverty with regard to health – both mental and physical. There are people who struggle daily to live with depression and anxiety, or poor physical health, or constant pain or terminal illness.
* And there is poverty of spirit – people who are far from the kingdom of God; people who are lost and drowning in the consequences of their sin.

James has two questions for us regarding poverty – all types of poverty…

1. Are we showing favouritism? In our church gatherings, do we tend to prefer the company of those who are neither complicated nor needy? Or do we go out of our way to show love to the un-lovely and un-attractive and include them in our circle of friendship?
2. What are we doing to alleviate the situation of the poor (all types of poor) – not only in our church, but in our wider community as well? Is our faith showing itself in action? – or do we live to please ourselves and our families, comfortably leaving the poor to Anglicare, or Centrelink or some other welfare organisation…

They’re hard questions.

Before we get too depressed…. let’s look briefly at Mark.

In today’s Gospel, we have two stories. Two encouraging stories. Two stories which should not only cheer us up, but begin to excite us…

1. In an effort to escape the crowds and a possible premature arrest, Jesus slipped over the border into the Gentile territory of Tyre. He’d barely set foot in the region when he was accosted by a woman who pleaded with him to heal her daughter. This woman was a Gentile and probably a heathen. The Jews called Gentiles ‘dogs.’ Jesus’ initial response was to remind her (and perhaps himself) that he was there first for the Jews. However, she would not be put off. She rightly pointed out that even the dogs could lick up the crumbs under the master’s table. It seemed that Jesus’ reputation had preceded him, and she was confident that he would respond with compassion. He did. Jesus was impressed with her perception and her faith. He accepted her and healed her child!
2. Then there is the story of the deaf man who could hardly talk. Jesus and his disciples were back in Jewish territory again, and we read that some friends brought this man to Jesus so he could place his hands on him. The man probably hadn’t been born deaf, as he had gained some speech. People would have seen him as someone under God’s judgement for sin. Interestingly, the friends didn’t ask for healing. They just asked for a blessing. But Jesus, again moved with compassion, healed the man completely and delivered him from his life of ostracism and poverty.

So how do these stories encourage us? They encourage us, because they show us God’s heart for the outcast and the infirm. They show us God’s compassion for the poor.

These stories ALSO encourage us, because Jesus shows us in his own life end example, what is possible as we seek to minister to the poor. Sure, Jesus is the Son of God – but hey! He lives in us, doesn’t he?

Jesus himself said, (John 14:12) “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.”

And then there are Jesus’ words from the end of the Gospel of Mark:

(Mar 16:17-18) And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."

The first disciples saw these promises fulfilled in their ministry following Jesus’ ascension, and his people have seen the same resurrection power throughout church history into the present day.

As Jesus said, the plight of the poor will always be with us. But we are not powerless when it comes to doing something about it.

* We can make a difference in our own circles just by intentionally showing the love of Christ to ALL people, without favouritism.
* We can make a difference by getting involved locally and further afield in projects which seek to ease the burden of the poor. Our church is part of the community conversation about starting a service to provide meals and friendship to those down on their luck. I’ll keep you posted…
* And we can make a difference by stepping out in faith and compassion, and praying for people to be healed, as Jesus leads us!

Let’s pray.