

Generous

Act on Poverty

Ask Ahead: a question to consider before this session

Can you think of a time when someone showed you generosity that went above and beyond your expectations? What difference did that make to your life?

Scripture Reading: Mark 12.41-44

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."



The richest 10% of the global population currently takes 52% of global income, whereas the poorest half of the population earns 8.5% of it.

(Source: World Inequality Report 2022)

'There is a substantial and robust body of research suggesting that countries with higher levels of inequality have lower levels of trust.'

(Source: The Equality Trust)

Reflection: How do we live generously in a cost of a living crisis?

In 2024 many people in the UK and in other countries around the world are wrestling with a cost of living crisis. This may well include members of your own church who are struggling to make ends meet. People may (or may not) want to share this with other members of the group. Be mindful of this in your discussions.

How can we be 'cheerful givers' (2 Corinthians 9.6) when we're already feeling the pinch or worse?

When everyone is tightening their belts the task of tackling poverty can seem overwhelming.

We know too that many churches are still grappling with the effects of the pandemic. Perhaps fewer people are getting involved in your church at present? Or maybe church finances are a worry?

How can we be generous with our time, energy and resources when we already feel depleted or overstretched?

The story from Mark above might offer some encouragement. This passage is often referred to as the story of the widow's 'mite'. A 'mite' (or 'lepton') was the smallest coin in use in Jesus' time, much like a penny in the UK today. The story might even be the inspiration for the phrase 'putting in my two pence' - referring to an opinion that we don't think will count for much.

The widow's gift is tiny, of so little worth that it seems to be almost without value. How much difference could two pence possibly make? Yet Jesus notices it and remarks on it. He seems to be praising the widow's exceptional generosity. **Perhaps the point of this story is to show us that small acts of generosity do have great value and that God recognises this.**

If we think about this a little further we find there is challenge as well as encouragement. The widow's gift (though tiny in monetary terms) involves handing away everything she has. The 'rich people' may offer 'large sums' but their overall wealth means the personal cost to them is actually very small. They will hardly notice the difference day-to-day. So, the widow with her two pennies has given more than 'all of them'.

If Jesus is presenting the widow as example for us, then the expectation is that we will be just as exceptionally giving. **It seems we are called to be generous even when we have almost nothing left. This is hard to hear!**

It's not the whole story, however. Some commentators on this passage have pointed out the context in which Jesus makes this observation. Immediately before the verses above, **Jesus speaks out against those with power who 'devour widows' houses', yet demand to be respected and honoured.** He is angry about a system that deprives already vulnerable people of their homes and livelihoods.

When Jesus comments on the widow's generosity then, his main purpose could be to question how she has ended up in extreme poverty. Why should her donation mean giving up 'all she had to live on', whilst others remain comfortably off? **Is the story less about giving up our last pennies and more about challenging the system that creates the widow's poverty?**

As so often in Mark's Gospel, there's no easy answer. We don't know what happens to the widow after she makes her donation. And we don't get to hear from her directly about her experience and what has brought her to this point.

The widow's gift may give us an insight into an unjust system in another way. Sam Wells (vicar of St Martin-in-the-fields in London) has suggested that the story shows us the difference between God's **economy of abundance** and the **economy of scarcity** that we experience in our sinful world.*

God promises us 'life abundant' - unending, never-ending grace, peace, justice and joy. That is what God desires for us and what God desires that we should extend to others, through acts of generosity and love. This is the economy of abundance.

But there is another message we hear from the world around us and often from within ourselves. This is message is that we are always lacking, that whatever we have is not enough. There is simply not enough to go around, we are told; we must keep back what we can for ourselves, just in case. This is the economy of scarcity.

The widow rejects this message. She gives as though she has no need of anything. The wealthier donors have everything they could want but keep something back. The widow is by the standards of Jesus' time and our own 'unwise' in the world's terms. The rich are more reasonable, since they hedge their bets and hold back from being too generous. This is not to minimise or glamorise the real impact of the widow's extreme poverty. But it does suggest that generosity can be an act of defiance. **When we hear that we are lacking, or deficient; when the world tells us that we need to hold back, our generosity can reveal a different vision. Maybe our two pence counts for more than we think.**

*Sam Wells, *God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics* (2006)



Listen In: Stephen Amusala, Anglican Development Service Western, Kenya

Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/actonpoverty>
(7 mins)

Stephen Amusala is Director of ADS Western, the social development agency of the Anglican Church in Western Kenya. He discusses the cost of living crisis in Kenya and the role of climate change in this. Stephen tells us how acts of loving generosity and working in partnership have made a difference in his context.

Stephen describes how despair can grow where there is poverty. He also talks about what can be done in response. **“Does God love me?” - is this a question you have asked in your life? What prompted this question? Have people around you shown you God’s love? What did this look like?**



Listen In: Deacon Kerry Scarlett, Vice President of the Methodist Conference

Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/actonpoverty>
(8 mins)

Kerry Scarlett is Vice President of the Methodist Conference in 2023/24 and a Learning and Development Officer within the Methodist Church. Hear her speak about growing up in the midst of conflict in Northern Ireland, her ministry experience with communities experiencing economic deprivation, and the places she has encountered generosity in her life.



Get Inspired: Street Banquet, Birmingham

Watch our short film (4 minutes) here: <https://youtu.be/i-6CwBDikXg>

In the audio resource above Kerry Scarlett discusses her experience volunteering with Street Banquet, an initiative of the Methodist Church in Birmingham. Street Banquet offers cooked meals and fellowship to unhoused or vulnerably housed people and invites them to join in the hosting of meals for others. In this video you can find out more about Street Banquet as a place of shared generosity, where guests are invited to become hosts.



Bonus audio: Stef Benstead on the Manchester Poverty Truth Commission

Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/actonpoverty>
(1 min)

Before you discuss the actions below, listen to this short extract in which disability activist Stef Benstead talks about her involvement in a Poverty Truth Commission in Manchester.

Act on Poverty - What could you and your church do?



As Stephen Amusala describes, churches can effect change by speaking to their political representatives. In acting together, it's important to make sure we are listening to those among us with lived experience of poverty. Poverty Truth Commissions are one way to bring together individuals and groups who can speak from this position, alongside those who have the power to make changes locally and nationally.

Action 1: Listen to our short bonus audio for this session (linked above), in which Stef Benstead outlines her involvement in the Manchester Poverty Truth Commission. Reflect on where in your church and your community the voices of those with lived experience of poverty are being heard and acted upon.

If this is already an area of strength for your church, you could think about whether there are new ways to share what you are doing, enabling others to learn from you.

If you'd like to learn more, you can read the report of the Manchester Poverty Truth Commission here: <https://www.church-poverty.org.uk/manchesterpovertytruth/>

And you can find out more about Poverty Truth Commissions here: <https://povertytruthnetwork.org/commissions/what-is-a-poverty-truth-commission/>

Action 2: Keep an eye on the news this week and look for an example of generosity, or for a situation where a small positive action has led to big changes. Write down what it is about this example that inspires you. You may like to share what you have found with others in your church.

'I am very glad that we were able to from a lot of effort, conversations, give and take achieve, you know, a a situation where three of our county governments have been able to, you know, put in place legislation ... so that then we have a framework for ... climate change intervention.

It enables local climate actions to be achievable. Sometimes when you talk about climate action, it may sound some big, big things that need to be done. Yes, there are big things to be done, but also for us really is the small things to be done. That planting and growing of that tree. **It may seem small, but it's such a huge thing.'**

Stephen Amusala, ADS Western

On the following page you'll find a **variation on the beatitudes** written by Deacon Eunice Attwood, Church at the Margins Officer for the Methodist Church. Is there one of these that stands out to you as an area where you would like to ask for God's help to do more?

Pray your chosen blessing together or individually.

Closing Prayer

Blessed are those who challenge unjust economic structures, for they will be signs of hope.

Blessed are those who amplify the voices and stories of others, for they will learn the wisdom of interdependence.

Blessed are those who recognize their vulnerability and brokenness, for they will resist being the saviours and heroes of other people's stories.

Blessed are those who respond to the needs of others, without the need for recognition or reward, for they serve Christ himself.

Blessed are those who protest and campaign, for they draw attention to injustice.

Blessed are those who nurture friendship amongst diverse people, for they will become an inclusive community.

Blessed are those who rage with anger, for they challenge us to face uncomfortable truths.

Blessed are the curious, for they will see beyond the answers of the powerful.

Blessed are those who celebrate the worth, dignity and value of every human being, for they will recognize the face of God.

Blessed are those who work for racial justice, for they challenge the sin of racism and know the true richness and diversity of God's image.

Blessed are those who enable the leadership of others, for they sustain the present and the future.

Rejoice and be glad, for those who truly listen and learn from people experiencing poverty will share in the liberating, life-giving message of the gospel of Christ.

Deacon Eunice Attwood

