

Trinity 17 2013

Words are powerful, they create images in our brain. Our thinking is shaped by our vocabulary and by the way in which words are used by people around us.

If I say to you, we need to help the poor. Who are you thinking about?

Are you visualising those who are starving in Africa, or the children who work down mines or on cocoa plantations, or in factories making clothes and footballs for the West. There is throughout the world, terrible poverty and awful oppression. There is sadly no shortage of images we can pull from our memory. The poor, as Jesus said, are always with us.

If I say to you we need to do something about people on benefits, what now comes immediately to mind?

Does it conjure images of people who are work shy, who can play the system, who somehow manage to have huge numbers of children in a large house, all supported by the state? That is an image fostered by certain sections of the press. There is no shortage of people ready to pass judgement.

And if I say to you we need to do something about poverty in this country, does that seem a contradiction in terms?

I am on the social and welfare committee at the Wimbledon Guild. It is a grant giving body and people are referred by doctors or social workers or housing officers. We only see those cases that have come to the attention of such professionals. They are small grants, for school uniform, children's shoes, a washing machine, and in some cases food, when the three visits to the food Bank have been exhausted. So why is this necessary? Sometimes benefits take a long time to come through. Sometimes, a flat is provided, but it has absolutely no furniture, no bed or bedding, and sometimes the parent is suffering from mental illness and cannot work out how to get help or, quite often, the person is just not capable of managing money and has no one to help them.

The cases referred to the Guild are the tip of the iceberg. There are those who for whatever reason have got themselves into incredible amounts of debt by borrowing from payday loan companies. These companies give out loans without requiring any credit checks, you don't have to be earning to borrow, and within a few weeks a £200 debt will have escalated to thousands. Wonga may be bad, but there are many that are far worse. Then there are those people who have no support, or structure to their lives. If you watched any episodes of Top Boy, you will have seen a bleak portrayal of life on an estate where drug running and gangs are the norm. When Rosemary Mallett from Angel

Town in Brixton came to speak to us last year, this was the life known to many of those who live in her parish. She was working hard to catch the children at primary school age before they got sucked in to a gang. Children in many of our tougher estates have no stability in their lives, no-one to teach them discipline except the gang leaders, whose discipline is brutal and dehumanising.

There is poverty, there is deprivation, both spiritual physical, and geographically it is very close to us.

Amos said

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land.

But now there are no restrictions on when you can trade, no waiting for the new moon to be over.

So, what's to be done.

Paul's letter to Timothy says to pray for our leaders. Yes we must, but we must also recognise that changing the situation will be very difficult. Careful legislation could do much to protect the weakest from immoral loan companies, or from terrible zero hours contracts. But some of the changes needed cannot be implemented by law, although the law can support change.

Our attitudes are formed when we are growing up. Children thrive best in a stable home. Ideally they will have two parents, but sometimes that is not possible. They require boundaries. They need to learn to wait. Even when they have that stability, it is hard for them. They watch television (and children love soaps) and they see life portrayed as full of arguments, and affairs, and trauma, and these abnormal relationships are normalised.

Our thinking is shaped by our vocabulary, the vocabulary of soaps and adverts.

We use need to mean want, we use love to mean enjoy, and we have no words left for real love, or real need.

How therefore can we teach our children that real love is about giving, about putting someone else's interests before one's own? How can we teach them that need is terrible, and diminishes life, physically and spiritually. If we have love, we cannot watch another be in need.

Jesus teaches us that our wealth is not important, but that it can be used to bring life and help to others and that when we use it in this way, we will be rewarded in God's kingdom.

But the poverty we have in this country is about more than lack of money. It is about lack of love. If you are not loved as a child, how can you ever learn to give love? Children will instead go in search of those things that bring brief enjoyment, so often called the things we love. Some of these are relatively harmless, others are immensely destructive.

We have to teach our children the vocabulary of love, of generosity.

A child that does not know what it is to be warm is a disgrace to society.

A child that does not know what it is to have a full stomach is an outrage to society.

A child that does not know what it is to be loved or how to love in return means there is no society.

In this church we probably have some of the best minds around. Surely, together, if we want to, we can find a way to bring about the changes that are needed to put an end to this physical and spiritual poverty that has become so prevalent in this country.

Paul, writing to Timothy said: ¹I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

May we too pray for our government and for all people, that each and every person may have dignity, security, and love.

Amen.