

“In Line with God”

One of my favorite British comedy teams is David Mitchell and Robert Webb. They have hilarious sketches: some of my favorites are the “Bad Vicar,” “Grammar Nazi,” “Are we the baddies,” and the “Posh Waiter.” A particular favorite because of the twisted sense of humor is called “Kill the Poor.” In this sketch the Prime Minister and two advisors are trying to determine the next steps in dealing with an economic crisis in the UK. The advisors have determined that no matter what they try such as raising taxes, cutting taxes, shoring up the pound, raising or lowering interest rates nothing will help with the recession. At that point the Prime Minister asks, “Have you tried killing all the poor?” The advisors are shocked, but it turns out that this is a favorite question of the Prime Minister. He does not really want to kill the poor, but he always wants to see if it would help. We find out further on in the sketch that he has others strange and offensive ideas that he has tried, and kill the poor may actually be something he would try. It is hilarious in its outrageousness and offensiveness.

Beyond my sick sense of humor, the issue of how to deal with poverty, locally, nationally, or globally, is one that has vexed societies for millennia. Isaiah, a Hebrew prophet from the 8th century BCE¹, speaks of the mistreatment and neglect of the poor in the very first chapter of his prophecy. He does not begin specifically by talking about the poor but rather about God’s disgust with the people of Israel.

Israel, a nation founded on God’s laws many of which were to guarantee the safety and welfare of all people regardless of status, ability, and property, has offended God through their neglect of the poor. God through Isaiah expresses disgust for the people of Israel by first referring to them as the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, the legendary cities that abused the celestial visitors and the family of Lot in the Genesis chapters 18-19. As if that were not enough, God goes on to disdain their worship, religious festivals and sacrifices. God calls them “abominations,” burdens, iniquity, and says he hates their offerings.

God goes on to declare that when the people “stretch out their hands” God will not listen. The implication is that their sins are so numerous and horrible that God cannot tolerate these people in any way.

If they are confused about God’s repulsion for them God makes it clear by pointing out that their hands are dripping with blood. God knows, even if they do not, that their neglect of the poor, widows and orphans is the same thing as intentionally killing them. When God makes it clear that it is their treatment of the poor that is the stain on them and the reason that they are not welcome before God, I would bet that it was news to them. Not so much because they thought they were taking care of the poor but rather because the poor were never on their minds. God tells them to wash themselves, which is more than a bath or ritual washing. This cannot be accomplished with sacrifices or incense. To clean themselves of this blood they must amend their lives.

Sadly this prophecy from 2,700 years ago, could be preached again today, right now, and in this place, and throughout the US and all countries of the world. We

¹ Before the Common Era is equivalent to BC but without the Christian overtones and originated in the 6th century CE/AD. See an enlightening entry in Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Era

might bristle at that because our country has social safety nets of a sort and we individually make charitable contributions to social welfare organizations like FISH, Seven Loaves or Windy Hill. But then we forget. Our contributions may salve our conscience, but we then go on to forget for a year that there are poor folk who are our neighbors and our friends.

Our charity also seem to permit us to write unfounded accusations against the people who live at Windy Hill, saying the residents of the new housing will make our town a place of criminal activity. Those same people neglect the criminal activity of so-called upstanding citizens who are engaged in such as illegal drug sales, drug use, human trafficking, financial misdeeds, and so much more. But allowing a poorer person to have an adequate home in a nice town will ruin the place and destroy our real estate values. All the while \$2.5 million dollar homes are going up lickety-split on the north side of Stonewall Street.

Abuse and vilification of the poor is as old as the hills of Judea and the hills of the Piedmont. It is an ancient curse that we not only endure, but foment either by our inaction or our convenient amnesia. Our hands will be as bloody as those of the ancient Israelites until we wash away our iniquity and cease to do evil in the eyes of God. That does not mean hiding our evil ways, but learning to do good and seek justice all people just as we pledged in our baptismal covenant.

As Isaiah wrote we are to “rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow.” We are to care for the most vulnerable in our society and in our world, not because it is moral or right or because God ordered it. We are to do these things because we are all God’s people. We are brothers and sisters and siblings. Science tells us that are DNA links every human being to prehistoric common ancestors. This is regardless of where we were born and what we consider our heritage. Those are recent history compared to our origins—scientifically and biblically.

God will allow that we can “argue it out.” But I bet dollars to donuts that God’s argument will be prevail. Thank God that it will. When God prevails God will then take our sins which are scarlet and crimson and wash them away making us as clean and pure as wool or snow.

Hear what the prophet says. Learn what the peoples of the centuries have struggled with. Care for the poor in thought, word and deed. Never think that what we have done politically, socially, and religiously is enough. As long as there are poor, hungry, lonely, and ill in the world God will be focused on their welfare. The Bible makes that clear. So let’s focus our energies, funds, and passions on helping others. If we put a little love in our hearts the world will be a better place.