

Hopeful

Act on Poverty

Ask Ahead: a question to consider before this session

Has there been a time in your life when you had to hold on to hope in difficult circumstances? Where did you find hope when you needed it?

Scripture Reading: Luke 4.14-21

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”
And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”



Those of us with lived experience of poverty face additional barriers to accessing mental health services, whilst being more likely to experience mental health challenges.
(Source: Mind, 2021)

67% of people aged 16-24 believe that their generation will be worse off than their parents’ generation.
(Source: Barnardo’s, 2019)

Reflection: How can we develop practices of hope?

In recent years, some mental health experts have spoken about a rise in “crisis fatigue” and burnout across the world. The Covid-19 pandemic, new armed conflicts, inequality and a rising cost of living, the climate emergency - these all take a toll. Of course, the impact is most serious for those directly affected; those whose lives, families and livelihoods are under threat. But **most of us know how difficult it can be to remain hopeful in challenging times**. We even have a word for our capacity to get drawn into a seemingly endless series of bad news stories on our phones and on social media. How long have *you* spent “doomscrolling” this week?

How can we develop practices of hope in these challenging times?

In our reading above from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has just returned to Galilee from the 'wilderness', where he has resisted a series of temptations. Amongst these temptations is the offer that Jesus could be ruler of 'all the kingdoms of the world', if only he will turn away from God the Father and worship the one who tempts him instead.

When Jesus returns to Nazareth and reads in the synagogue, it is no accident that he reads a particular section from Isaiah. Jesus has been anointed by the Spirit in baptism and has come out of the wilderness with a mission: to show and enact what God's power is *for*, what God desires for us. In contrast to the tempter's idea that power is about having *authority over* people, Isaiah's words tell us that God's power is directed towards the **liberation and healing of people who are oppressed and suffering**. This is what I am here to do, says Jesus. This is the Good News.

Jesus aligns himself with the voices of the prophets who proclaim God's message of hope and promise of justice.* Hope spoken in a prophetic voice is not the same as 'positive thinking' or simple optimism. Hope here means more than telling someone 'it will be alright, wait and see'.

'... the ability to name pain and voice grief is in itself a form of hope.'

(Emmanuel Katongole, *Born From Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa*, 2016)

This is hope that wrestles with the realities of the situation experienced by those in poverty, the prisoners, and the marginalised.

Emmanuel Katongole has worked with communities in Africa where violent conflict and poverty lead to daily struggles. His research, however, has shown that the depiction of such communities as 'without hope' is far from the truth.

Instead, he suggests, it is here we see the complexity of holding on to hope in the most desperate of situations. We are shown that hope and lament are closely connected.

Katongole says that hope as a practice involves wrestling, struggling, righteous anger, protesting, and mourning. **Our hope is heard in the raising of our voices to God and worldly powers, as we ask "why" and demand justice. It is heard too in the proclamation of a different reality: 'the year of the Lord's favour'.**

The vision of hope that Jesus proclaims is an expansive one. It is hope in action, a promise of change.

There is, however, another text about poverty that suggests our hope should be more limited. In Matthew 26 a woman anoints Jesus' feet with 'very costly ointment'. The disciples call this a 'waste' and point out that the ointment could have been sold and the money given to those in poverty. Jesus replies: 'She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.' (Matt. 26.6-13; see also Mark 14.3-9 and John 12.1-8.)

More than one political leader in recent years has used this phrase 'you will always have the poor with you' to suggest that social action on poverty can only go so far.**

And this seems to make sense, at least up to a point. Surely Jesus' words mean that there can be no end to poverty until the new heaven and the new earth. We can hold on to hope of some change but in a sinful world there are limits to what any of us can achieve.

*See our 'Prophetic' course pack in this series for more on this theme.

** Examples include Tony Abbott in Australia in 2010, who went on to become the Australian Prime Minister and Rick Perry in 2014 when he was Governor of Texas.

There are some problems though with accepting this statement as a boundary to our hope and viewing poverty (at least in this world) as to some degree unavoidable or endemic.

An interpretation like this misses **the radical scale and scope of the promises of God** that we see in our reading from Luke. Jesus does not announce himself as the one who has come to free only some of the oppressed, or bring good news to some people in poverty. Throughout the Gospels, on the contrary, Jesus repeatedly stresses that the love, justice and joy of the kingdom are for everyone and that this kingdom is breaking into the world here and now, through him and his disciples. Jesus is the one who turns the tables, upsets systems, speaks up against exploitation and oppression. Jesus defeats death itself! It's very hard to imagine that he would shrug with resignation as he said, 'the poor are always with you'.

Rev. Dr Liz Theoharis, a priest and co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign in the US, has highlighted a connection that it is easy to miss in this phrase. 'The poor are always with you' is found in Deuteronomy 15, where the rules are set out for the sabbatical or jubilee year: a time of remission of debts, scheduled to take place every seven years. Theoharis points out that Deuteronomy says *both* **'there will ... be no one in need among you'** (15.4) *and* **'there will never cease to be some in need'** (i.e. the poor are always with you, 15.11).

How can both be true? Theoharis suggests that 15.11, 'the poor are always with you' refers to the situation when *the world is not as it should be*. When we are not following God's ways, then poverty will persist. The year of Jubilee is a step towards mending the world, bringing it closer to God's kingdom where there will be 'no one in need among you'. The idea that every seven years we should wipe out debts and start again is radical enough in our context of credit cards and payday loans. For Theoharis the Deuteronomy passage is actually saying this doesn't go far enough. This is only a sign, a beginning, of what we should set our sights on.

So, when Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 15.11 it is to say: this is the way the world will continue to be if you do not follow God fully, extravagantly, expansively, believing in changes that the world tells you cannot be made - the forgiveness of all debts forever, the abolition of need. The woman with the ointment is then perhaps a better witness to this vision because of the extravagance of her gesture, the recklessness of her love. That extravagant love is shown to Jesus as one who lived in poverty, knew what it was to be refugee, knew hunger and injustice, who suffered and who was to die. This boundless love and plenty is a sign of what we should hope for, for everyone.

Listen In: Carlos Valle, Field Advisor, Comision de Accion Social Menonita (CASM), Honduras



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

CASM's mission is to address economic, social, environmental and political injustice in partnership with communities in Honduras. With the support of Christian Aid, CASM is working with coffee farmers and honey producers to develop climate-smart practices as the region feels the effects of the climate crisis.

Hear from Carlos Valle, Field Advisor on these projects, as he tells us about the project and the hope for the future that he sees as he works with farmers day-to-day.

Carlos says that hope can start with something as small as a 'grain of sand'. What small things give you hope?



Listen In: Jess Hall, Campaigns and Organising Officer, Christian Aid, UK

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

Jess discusses what drew her into campaigning and what gives her hope for change. She tells us how lament and hope are not opposed for her and how she balances realism about our human failings with faith in the vision of God's Kingdom come on earth.

Hear from Jess about her work with Christian Aid and the signs of hope that she sees in our world. **Have you ever been involved in any kind of activism?** That could be a petition, a protest, a march, speaking or writing to someone with power. **If so, what was your experience? If not, how do you feel about taking that step in the future? Can you think of a time when you have been bold and tried something new? What gave you courage in that situation?**

Which movements from the past inspire you when you think of people who have changed the world?



Get Inspired: The Baptist Union of Wales and the BRACT programme in Zimbabwe

Watch our short film (7 minutes) here: <https://youtu.be/RM26KNVmn-E>

Hear from Simeon Baker, Director of Mission for the Baptist Union of Wales about their work with the BRACT programme in Zimbabwe. Their 'Talents of Hope' initiative, supported by Christian Aid, is connecting global neighbours in rural Wales and North East Zimbabwe. BRACT helps communities in Zimbabwe develop their resilience, through new agricultural techniques, training, community groups and new technologies.



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

"I have the hope that everyone joined together will improve the community", Carlos Valle, from Honduras, reminds us of the importance of joint action.

If you have used other course packs in this series, you'll have seen just how important working in partnership and building connections is when tackling poverty. Churches, charities, and other groups across the UK, and around the world, can unite to take action. And together we can tell those in power to make poverty a priority.

Whether it's the global cost of living crisis, lack of appropriate housing, the climate crisis, or another of the challenges we're facing together, politicians have a role to play and we can hold them to account. This week's action might feel like a big step for some of us but it's not a step you need to take alone. We have a whole range of resources to support you as you take your action forward.

Action: Discuss in your group and begin working with others in your church on a plan to meet with someone with political power in your area, perhaps your MP. What issue would you raise in this meeting?

Of course, you'll need to speak to others in your church and community. Your plan needs be appropriate to your context and resources. But you could take a few minutes together to think about the first step. Who would you need to talk to within your church to get the ball rolling? How would you connect with those who have power? What are the pressing issues that you would like to see addressed? What would you like those with power to know about your concerns and hopes for the future?

To help you in your discussions we have a host of additional resources to help you engage your politicians and get your wider church community on board – take a look at caid.org.uk/actonpovertyresources

Our final pack of the course 'Together' also offers further tools to support your church in making your own Act on Poverty Plan and develop your political engagement.

Closing Prayer

Jesus said:
"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

As God's people,
let us reaffirm our hope and our task.

God's kingdom is coming
Proclaim Jubilee

For those pushed into poverty
Proclaim Jubilee

For those weighed down by debt
Proclaim Jubilee

For those living in fear
Proclaim Jubilee

For those treated as less than human
Proclaim Jubilee

For those who have lost hope
Proclaim Jubilee

For those held captive by cynicism
Proclaim Jubilee

For all who need to hear good news
Proclaim Jubilee

May our proclamations and our prayers
be accompanied by advocacy and action.
God's kingdom come!
Amen

This prayer has been adapted from material produced by the Joint Public Issues Team as part of their Reset the Debt campaign in 2020-22.

Could you use this structure of this prayer to create your own version for your context?

