THE FACE OF THE POOR

GOSPEL READING
Mt 20:1-16

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner going out at daybreak to hire workers for his vineyard. He made an agreement with the workers for one denarius a day, and sent them to his vineyard...Then at about the eleventh hour he went out and found more men standing round, and he said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ ‘Because no one has hired us’ they answered. He said to them, ‘You go into my vineyard too.’

In the evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his bailiff, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last arrivals and ending with the first.’ So those who were hired at about the eleventh hour...received one denarius each. When the first came, they expected to get more, but they too received one denarius each. They took it, but grumbled...‘The men who came last’ they said ‘have done only one hour, and you have treated them the same as us, though we have done a heavy day’s work in all the heat.’ He answered...‘My friend, I am not being unjust to you; did we not agree on one denarius? Take your earnings and go. I choose to pay the last comer as much as I pay you. Have I no right to do what I like with my own? Why be envious because I am generous?”
SLIPPERY SLOPE
In Singapore, as in many other countries, people tend to move around with others who share a similar status or situation — the rich have rich friends, the middle-class have middle-class friends, and the poor spend most of their time with others who face similar financial difficulties. Unlike other big cities where the poor live on the streets, Singapore’s streets are as clear of beggars and homeless people as they are of litter. Still, there are poor people in this rich city state. Some were once comfortably middle-class but changing circumstances – the loss of a job, illness or disability – led to a rapid decline in their financial well-being. Others were born into a poor family and found it difficult to break out of poverty.

Caritas Singapore recently conducted a joint study on the poor who are served by Catholic charities in Singapore. The study identified four distinct groups of people who currently receive aid from Catholic charities: the middle-aged unemployed, single parents, those suffering from disabilities, and the elderly. This issue of Faith+Life will explore the challenges and struggles affecting the elderly poor today.

Reflect:
What insecurities do you personally experience?
How does poverty directly or indirectly affect you?

SMALL CHANGE
Mr Koh is in his early 70s and suffers from arthritis. He works as a contract cleaner at a hawker centre, clearing tables and sweeping floors 10 to 12 hours a day, everyday. He earns less than SGD$700 a month and spends most of this on food and utilities. Whatever extra he saves he spends on medicine. He halves his dosage to just one a day to stretch supplies. Mr Koh is thankful for his life but he isn’t optimistic about the future.

Mr Koh is not alone. Many hawker centres are staffed by the elderly poor who live hand to mouth. With little in the way of savings or state support, they have little choice but to accept low-paying jobs with few benefits. Some successful Singaporeans, including labour economists and senior civil servants, have argued for a minimum-wage law to protect Singaporeans like Mr Koh. This is to ensure that all workers who put in a full day’s work are able to earn a living wage.

Last Sunday’s Gospel reading demonstrates that there is room for mercy and generosity in matters of fairness. God’s ways are different from ours. Where we might mete out rewards and punishments based strictly on what is merited, God’s gift of grace is freely given to all even though we have done nothing to deserve it.

Reflect:
What are your attitudes towards the poor in Singapore? What factors are perpetuating the poverty cycle and preventing the poor from improving their situation in life?
Are low-wage workers being fairly paid? What factors should be considered in setting a minimum wage or a living wage?

LIVING TRADITION
“The obligation to provide justice for all means that the poor have the single most urgent economic claim on the conscience of the nation.”

- Economic Justice for All, paragraph 86.

Attributed to Nathan Hayag on Flickr

LIVING TRADITION
“the national discussion about our economic future will affect the poor most of all… Decisions must be judged in light of what they do for the poor, what they do to the poor, and what they enable the poor to do for themselves. The fundamental moral criterion for all economic decisions, policies, and institutions is this: They must be at the service of all people, especially the poor.”

- Economic Justice for All, paragraph 24.
PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

Although there are many government schemes in place to help the lower-income, one needs to meet strict criteria to qualify for such aid. The government doesn’t want to encourage dependence on state handouts or undermine people’s motivation to work. Yet, the means testing can be so rigorous that it prevents some who are truly in need from accessing government aid. A study on income trends in 2007 reported that among households with at least one working member, almost 20% of households derived less than SGD$2000 a month from work while almost 5% of households derived less than SGD$1000 a month.¹

Singapore’s social safety net is supported by charity, religious, and voluntary welfare organisations that try to reach those who fall through the cracks. However, care for the poor cannot be delegated to a handful of individuals, a few organisations, or a single government ministry. As Christians and citizens, all of us share a common responsibility towards each other.


Reflect:
Who are the poor that you encounter in your daily life? What challenges and difficulties do they face?

What concrete actions can you personally carry out with your parish, ministry, or neighbourhood Christian community to help the poor build greater self-reliance?

LIVING TRADITION

“we are challenged to make a fundamental ‘option for the poor’ – to speak for the voiceless, to defend the defenceless, to assess life styles, policies, and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor. ‘This ‘option for the poor’ does not mean pitting one group against another, but rather, strengthening the whole community by [aiding] the most vulnerable…those with the greatest needs require the greatest response.”

- Economic Justice for All, paragraph 16.