

good news to the oppressed

Use this service outline by **Diane Craven** to reflect on the impact of the Poverty Premium in your worship, and inspire your congregation to take action. It can be used at any time that is convenient for your church, but is designed to be particularly suitable for use on 14 December, the third Sunday of Advent.

Many of us are familiar with the idea that people in poverty have less in material terms and have fewer opportunities – but what about the hidden costs of living in poverty?

Church Action on Poverty's 'Food, Fuel, Finance' programme is working to tackle the unfair 'Poverty Premium' paid by low-income people for essential goods and services. The poorest families pay an average of £1,300 per year more than other families for these basics – a shocking injustice.

The third Sunday of Advent marks a turn in the mood, and is known as 'Gaudete Sunday' in some traditions (from the words used in the liturgy *Gaudete in Domino semper*, 'Rejoice in the Lord always'). But what do we have to rejoice about in such a broken, unjust and troubled world? The lectionary readings for the third Sunday of Advent offer us some rich themes for reflection on injustice and hope for a future yet to be revealed, where "the hungry are fed and the rich are sent away empty"; where "the brokenhearted are healed and the oppressed go free" (see Luke 1:53 and Isaiah 61:1). Mary's words in the *Magnificat* are a powerful manifesto for the church and a rallying call to a new way of being. For the moment, this world seems a distant dream. The call is then for us to recommit to bringing a fairer world closer to reality by prayer, costly commitment and action.

prepare



We recommend that you learn a little more about the 'Food, Fuel, Finance' programme by turning to page 5 or visiting www.church-poverty.org.uk/foodfuelfinance. You could also look at Save the Children's breakdown of all the extra costs, at www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/the-poverty-premium-how-poor-households-pay-more-for-essential-goods-and-services. Think about reproducing some of this information on your service sheet.

In the gathering area, place a set of scales and weights, each labelled with examples of the extra costs faced by people in poverty, together with suitable verses of scripture from this week's readings or other passages.

plan



gather

Use one of these prayers. The second one requires several different voices, possibly speaking from different parts of the building.

We lament the injustice of our world
Where more is taken from those
who have nothing
We cry to you for freedom from poverty
Freedom from oppression and despair
Freedom from all that binds us.
Come and save us O God.
Give us beauty where we see only ashes
Joy where there is mourning
And hope where all seems lost.

Amen

Voice 1 Why should we rejoice
when life is so unfair
when simply living takes so much energy
and when we can see no future
for ourselves or our children?
When will we see the restoration of God?
When will God's kingdom come?

Voice 2 Look!
The Lord is close at hand.

Voice 1 He will gather in his arms the lost and the
vulnerable
He will lead his people to the good grass
He will place those with nothing at the centre of
the kingdom.

Voice 2 Make straight the way of the Lord!
He will scatter the proud
He will lift up the fallen
He will send the rich away hungry
And feed the poor with riches beyond their
imagining

Voice 1 Make straight the way of the Lord!
For the smallest are of such infinite value
The weakest are strong
And the lost are found
When the Lord comes.

Voice 2 Make straight the way of the Lord!

Voice 1 Look!
the Lord is close at hand
To raise up the fallen
To bless and forgive
To heal and strengthen
Make straight the way of the Lord!

All Come and save us O God.
Amen

share the word

The readings for 14 December in the Revised Common Lectionary are:

- Isaiah 61:1–4; 8–11
- Psalm 126 or Luke 1:46b–55
- 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24
- John 1:6–8; 19–26

Visual presentation

Set up a seesaw, using a plank and a suitable support. On one side, place 'weights' – cardboard boxes which are labelled with examples of the Poverty Premium and its effects. On the other side, place boxes with 'reprieves' which would enable people to escape the effects of the Premium. You can create your own weights and reprieves based on local experience, or draw on the ideas below and stories in Church Action on Poverty publications.

Example weights

The gas bill has gone up by £10 per month.

We need a new sofa. BrightHouse or Perfect Homes want to charge us twice what the sofa is worth through a rent-to-own arrangement.

I am being pursued by my creditors for money.

The interest on my loan has spiralled out of control.

My benefits have been delayed for eight weeks.

My benefits have been stopped for a month because I missed an appointment.

My employer had no work for me this week.

Example reprieves

I managed to get my prepayment meter removed, and switched to an equitable energy supplier.

We found a cheap sofa through a local charity.

I got advice from a debt agency.

I joined my local credit union and I can now borrow money more affordably when I need to.

I got a food parcel from the local food bank.

The Citizens Advice Bureau helped me to make certain I'm receiving all the benefits I'm entitled to.

Family and friends had to lend me money to see me through.

Talk the congregation through this as a process, possibly interspersing snippets from the personal stories in Church Action on Poverty publications.

It should become clear very quickly that it does not take a great deal to disturb the balance, and the smallest amount of extra weight can make what is just held in tension crash to the ground. Ask other people to come and take off the weights one by one until balance is achieved.

Alternatively, you could illustrate the issue using a giant 'snakes and ladders' board, with the weights as snakes and the reprieves as ladders.

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me...”

The emphasis in this passage from Isaiah is on the message that is from God (many scholars have argued over the identity of the speaker). God has anointed the speaker to carry out an action, but is affirming the enabling presence that makes it possible. The passage is calling us to act out of a deep sense of dwelling in God.

The “poor” referred to here are not just people facing economic poverty; they are the returned exiles waiting for restoration. The key here is that poverty is often connected to a lack of power, and being trapped by circumstances beyond your control. The Poverty Premium is a modern example of a structure which traps and oppresses vulnerable people.

God calls us to stand alongside people who are poor, marginalised and excluded – and to speak out against injustice. As the passage says, “I the Lord love justice” – justice is part of who God is and it should be a hallmark of the church as well.

“To provide for those who mourn in Zion” (Isaiah 61:3)

What is the church called to do? What actions are you and I called to at this time? Invite church members to make some form of private commitment or promise that they will work on through the season.

Could any of us afford to give up some luxuries and collect the money saved together to offer for others who can’t afford the basics?

“They shall repair the devastation of generations”

(Isaiah 61:4)

Poverty spreads its tentacles through generations. In some parts of the county, poverty is a feature of the personal landscape of young people and children. Family life can be blighted for generations by lack of opportunity and an inability to be free of the weight of debt. Children suffer the effects of the debt trap that holds their parents and carers. Advent calls the church to take up the call to free the oppressed, to commit to bringing the kingdom into the here and now, and to hold out to those who suffer the possibility of restoration.

“May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy”

(Psalm 126:5)

“He has filled the hungry with good things and has sent the rich away hungry” (Luke 1:53)

These verses speak of a reversal of fortunes that is so much a sign of the activity of God and of God’s kingdom. Advent calls us to recommit to building a world where we choose the common good, and do not expect to have money or wealth at the expense of others. We are to be the voice that cries in the wilderness – crying for justice and making our voices (both individual and corporate) heard over the unjust practices that lead to the Poverty Premium.

Advent is a good time for the whole church to reconsider our priorities and to look at where our treasure really is located. It’s a time for us all to begin giving more, owning less and travelling more lightly – prayerfully clearing away the things that obscure Christ’s light in our own lives, and then acting to bring the light of Christ to others.

explore the word

**the spirit of the
Lord is upon me ...
to provide for those
who mourn in Zion
... they shall repair
the devastation of
generations ... may
those who sow in
tears reap with shouts
of joy ... he has filled
the hungry with good
things and has sent
the rich away hungry**

Suggested hymns and songs

- Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord
- Setting of the *Magnificat* sung by the choir
- Make way (Kendrick)
- Give thanks with a grateful heart
- Come thou long expected Jesus
- Hills of the North rejoice
- Be still for the presence of the Lord

respond to the word



Give

Take up a collection or hold a coffee morning for Church Action on Poverty. The money raised will go towards our 'Food, Fuel, Finance' project – supporting people who are affected by the Poverty Premium to act together and get Fair Prices for themselves (see www.church-poverty.org.uk/foodfuelfinance).

Act

Ask the congregation to commit to take one action – as individuals or as a church – in response to this week's themes and the call to work for a more just world. They could write this down in response to the sermon or at another suitable time during the service. Here are some ideas:

- **Find out about credit unions** – could your church support a local credit union or even set one up? For ideas, take a look at www.churchofengland.org/our-views/home-and-community-affairs/home-affairs-policy/work-and-the-economy/creditunions.aspx or www.brighterfuturestogether.co.uk/brighter-futures-together-toolkit/create-a-credit-union-for-your-community/
- **Make sure your church pays the Living Wage**, which would help lift many families out of poverty. See www.church-poverty.org.uk/livingwage
- **Support our campaign for Fair Prices**. Sign up at www.church-poverty.org.uk/act, and take part in regular e-actions targeting the companies and decision-makers who have the power to tackle the Poverty Premium.

Pray

Make straight the way of the Lord
Come and save us O God.

Where advertisers manipulate our desires
Where we want more than enough
And fail to notice the needs of others
Make straight the way of the Lord
Come and save us O God.

Where lies cover the truth
And individuals and nations act out of greed
Trampling on the oppressed
Make straight the way of the Lord
Come and save us O God.

In our homes and families
Teach us to forgive and to heal
May love surround us and kindness flourish
Make straight the way of the Lord
Come and save us O God.

In our church
Give us courage to stand up for what is right
to be truth-speakers
and to work for justice among us
This Advent, make us ready to receive you.
Make straight the way of the Lord
Come and save us O God.

Give us courage to build the kingdom
To remain watchful and generous-hearted
And to be alert to the work
of your Spirit in our midst,
Disturbing our complacency
challenging the status quo
and teaching us how to walk with you
and live for you.
Make straight the way of the Lord
Come and save us O God.

sending out

Send us out into your world O God
Give us courage to challenge injustice
To speak on behalf of those with no voice
And to walk alongside those who suffer.
Give us generous hearts
So that we may we share what we have
And carry the burdens of the overwhelmed.
Fed by your hand O God
May we feed the hungry
Give hope to the lost
and bring your light and love
into a world that waits in darkness.

Amen

