



## Rich and Poor

A sermon by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

**Readings: Micah 5.2-5a; Hebrews 10.5-10; Luke 1.39-45**

‘God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.’ Mary’s not just talking about herself; she’s talking about Jesus; and about us. In Jesus God, the mighty, the powerful, comes down from the heavenly throne and becomes lowly, and fills the hungry with good things; and then is lifted up, first on the cross, and then in the resurrection, and finally in the ascension.

This is what Mary’s saying about herself. ‘God’s divinity has transformed my humanity – personally, economically, socially, politically. God’s transforming my life the way pregnancy’s transforming my body, making it full of promise and expectation and fertility and joy.’ And this is what Mary’s saying to each one of us today. ‘Are you allowing God’s divinity to transform your humanity? Are you allowing the Holy Spirit to sing a song of joy and hope through you?’

Those are big questions, so I want to break them down into four parts of a conversation. I’d like to invite you to have this conversation with someone over the next few days.

If you’re feeling short of courage, or a little uncertain, have the conversation with someone with whom you feel very comfortable, maybe someone with whom you’re looking forward to spending Christmas. If you’re feeling a little more courageous, try having this conversation with someone from a different place in society to yourself, a different race or class maybe; someone you’d usually be worried about offending or ignoring or not understanding or more than likely not even knowing. Here are the four parts of the conversation I’d like to encourage you to have.

- Tell me about the ways in which you’re rich.
- Tell me about the ways in which you’re poor.
- Let me tell you about the ways in which *I’m* poor.
- Let me tell you about the ways in which I’m rich.

That’s it. Those are the four parts of a conversation I’m encouraging you to have with someone in the next few days. Of course how you’re likely to have the conversation depends on who you’re having it with. If the person’s in desperate need, you’re probably going to be starting with discovering the ways in which they are poor. But if the person’s in anything other than significant pain, distress, or hardship, it’s most likely you’re going to want to begin by discovering the ways in which they’re rich. And again, what you say about yourself is likely to depend on what the other person’s said about *themselves*. You’re going to want to make human connections, and so if what they’ve said about their poverty resonates with what you feel about your own poverty, you’re likely to want to start with recognizing that. Or if you’ve felt a sense of common identity in what they’ve said about the ways they are rich, you’re likely to look to start there.

So maybe the conversation might go something like this. You’d say, “Tell me about the ways in which you’re rich.” And your friend might say, “I appreciate the way you see me for what I am and not just for what I’m not. My childhood was difficult, but I feel rich in the number and variety of people my parents brought into my life. My education wasn’t very successful on paper, but I feel rich in the way I learned to read people and look into their hearts. I’ve never lived in a luxurious home, but I feel rich in the wonder of the birds and their song and the dawn and its beauty and the pouring rain and its refreshment. I’ve never had many great talents, but I did learn to play the harmonica and I’d love to play you a song I made up myself. I’ve never had much money, but I have

a wealth of friends and somehow, maybe because I've always tried to help people out, there's always been someone who's stepped out of the shadows to help me when I couldn't manage everything myself."

And then maybe you'd say, "Tell me about how the ways in which you're poor." And your friend might say, "You're probably expecting me to talk about how I can't pay the rent and can't find a job. But the real way I feel poor is when I see a person who's a lot worse off than me and I feel powerless to help them. The real times I feel poor are when I see a newcomer to this country trying to make their way and I can't speak enough of their language to be much use to them. The real times I feel poor are when I think of my daughter who died when she was just two and I was just 19 and I miss her with more sadness than I have in my whole heart."

And then maybe you'd say, "May I tell you about the ways in which I am poor?" And your friend might say, "Please do. I'd never thought of you, or someone like you, as poor." And you might say, "My brother was the talented one. I felt like my parents really just wanted boys. I felt I had to apologize for being a girl. All my life I've struggled with envy and jealousy. I've always hated my brother, even though I've never told him and anyone would think we were the best of friends, and I've never been able to trust that the love and achievements and possessions I've had weren't just about to be snatched away from me. In some ways I have a lot but I've never been able really to enjoy what I have. I wonder if I've ever trusted anyone enough to show them who I really am.

"But I'm also rich. Let me tell you about how I'm rich. I've always had the ability to concentrate. I can listen, or read, or even be silent and pray, for hours. And I can paint. I can paint a watercolor, I can paint a miniature, I can paint a wall, I can paint a face, I can paint anything and make it laugh and dance and spring to life. I find it hard to talk to and trust people, but I share my heart through my paintbrush."

When the two of you have shared your wealth and your poverty with one another in this way, you may want to leave it there. But you may choose to go a little further.

Your friend may say to you, "You've told me about how you're rich. Let me tell you about how you're rich. You're rich because you don't have to spend every waking moment of your day earning money so you've got time to do beautiful things and walk with people who're in trouble. And let me tell you how you're poor. You're poor because you've never found a way to love your brother. You're poor because you've never let anyone into your inner circle. You're poor because you don't have enough people like me around you to tell you the truth about yourself."

And then, ever so tentatively, you may find the courage to say to your friend, "You've told me about how you're rich. Let me tell you about how you're rich. You're rich because your laugh is infectious and exciting. You're rich because every child you ever meet loves you. You're rich because you've already been through the worst that life can bring so you live without fear. But you're also poor. You're poor because you've got a servant heart but no one wants what you have to give right now. You're poor because you're deeply hungry to do something really useful to others but you can't find a way to do it."

That's the point where it's time to ask Mary's question. "Are you allowing the Holy Spirit to sing a song of joy and hope through you?" Through your poverty and through your riches. Can you each see it in one another? Can you each see it in yourselves? Are you letting God turn you into Mary's song?

If you have the first kind of interaction, where you talk about yourselves and how you're each rich and poor, that's great. That's called a conversation. But if you have the second kind of interaction, where you talk about each other, that's even better. That's more than a conversation. That's called a real relationship.

Poverty is a mask we put on a person to cover up their real wealth. And wealth is a disguise we put on a person to hide their profound poverty. Those we call the rich are those in whom we choose to

see the wealth but are more reluctant to see the deep poverty. Those we call the poor are those in whom we choose to see the hunger but are slower to see the profound riches.

“God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” God takes that in each of us that’s rich, and sees through it to our poverty. And God takes our poverty, and sees past it to our deeper riches.

And every day we come before God and enact these very same words. We think of our neighbour, in person, society and globe, in sea, soil, and sky; ... and we think about their wealth. And we call that praise. We think of our neighbour in their poverty..., and we call that intercession. We think of ourselves in our poverty..., and we call that confession. We think of ourselves in our riches..., and we call that thanksgiving. These are the four parts of prayer. Praise, intercession, confession, thanksgiving. The riches of the world..., the poverty of the world..., the poverty of ourselves..., the riches of ourselves.... These are the ways we make that courageous intimate conversation a daily act of renewal.

Have that conversation with someone this week. Make it the transforming moment of your Christmas. Make it the time you remember that, in Christ, God the mighty left wealth and took on poverty to make you wealthy in the way God is wealthy. Make it the time you discover another’s poverty and another’s wealth, and redefine your own wealth and your own poverty. Have that sacred conversation with another person this week.

*But have that conversation with God every day. For that’s what prayer is. Prayer’s when we see God’s wealth and God’s poverty, and bring to God our poverty and wealth, and our neighbour’s too. That’s a daily conversation, in which our friendships, our lives, and our world are being transformed.*

And it finishes like this: “Lord, turn me into Mary’s song. Through your Holy Spirit, sing a song of joy and hope through me.”