

Sidelined

Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Mark 10:46-52

A Peruvian priest who founded liberation theology, a movement advocating an active role for the Roman Catholic Church in fighting poverty and injustice but reviled by some as Marxist, has died.

Father Gustavo Gutiérrez was 96.

A theologian who later became a Dominican friar, he revolutionised Roman Catholic Church teachings with his 1971 book *Theology of Liberation*. His progressive theories were embraced by many in his native Latin America but were also met with opposition and even disdain from more conservative voices within the Church.

He drew criticism from Pope Benedict who feared that liberation theology's, "Marxist ideas" would foster rebellion and division, even labelling it as a "fundamental threat to the faith of the Church".

Relations between the Vatican and Father Gutiérrez thawed somewhat after his fellow Latin American, Francis became Pope.

Father Gutiérrez maintained that his teachings were far from revolutionary but rather squarely rooted in the Bible. He said that upon his return from Europe to Peru, he had found that the Church was often "answering questions that weren't being asked", implying that the Church hierarchy had become too far removed from the troubles of its parishioners, especially in deprived and poor areas. He argued that the church had a lot to learn from the faithful in the poorest parishes who, he said, demonstrated day after day how hope could spring amidst suffering.

In his book *The Hermeneutic of Hope*, he recalled how he had fought against a view prevalent among many faithful at the time that, "we are born to suffer". "No one is born to suffer, but to be happy," he wrote. "Poverty is a human construction; *we* have made these conditions."

Father Gutiérrez praised Pope Francis for speaking about "a poor Church for the poor", and in 2018, Pope Francis sent Father Gutiérrez a letter for his 90th birthday thanking him "for what you have contributed for the Church and humanity through your theological service and your preferential love for the poor and the discarded of society". People on the sidelines.

Bartimaeus was a poor man. He was blind, he was a beggar. We are not told if he had any family or friends. He was probably living on the throwaway coins, or food, from passers-by. Maybe some were generous, but we might reflect on our own response to street beggars and realise that it would have been a literally a hand-to-mouth existence. Humanity's attitude to the vociferous poor has probably not changed much over the centuries. Sometimes it is about all that we can do to look them in the eye, let alone give them the food they need, or a little money that would help.

After refusing to be silenced by the crowd Bartimaeus, one of the few healed people given his Aramaic name, is called by Jesus. Bartimaeus called out for mercy. Jesus called Bartimaeus to Him. The blind man leapt up, and threw away his cloak, the cloak he would have spread out every day to catch the coins he begged, his only means of livelihood. It is a powerful statement. The cloak was his protection, his working clothes, his fashion statement, his bank. Yet he threw it away eagerly. He knew he needed something else, therefore the only thing he had he threw aside, to receive something better.¹

Last week you may remember Jesus asked His disciples James and John what they wanted, and they asked to sit on Jesus' right and left in the Kingdom of heaven, places of honour they did not deserve. On the road to Jerusalem, before Palm Sunday, Jesus asked the same question of Bartimaeus. "What do you want Me to do for you?" "Master," said Bartimaeus, "Let me receive my sight."

The unwanted beggar who the crowd tried to silence, who the crowd wanted to keep on the sidelines, asked for sight. Jesus, preoccupied as He was with all that lay ahead of Him in Jerusalem, stopped, turned aside, and paid attention to the man on the sidelines. For Jesus, for God, no one is a nobody; everyone has a name, a place, and a value.ⁱⁱ

Some years back I was able to volunteer for Crisis at Christmas operating in the south side of Edinburgh. On Christmas Day a whole range of people made a gift of their time and expertise to people without homes in our city. There was hot food and hot drinks. There was a dentist and a couple of doctors offering basic care. There was a barber and a hairdresser. There was a vet looking after some of the animals that the homeless women and men had as company. There were people offering advice on claims and benefits. There were people sitting down and playing board games and chatting to those who had come in. I remember one old man, in his 70s, telling me, "No one really talks to me. No one really pays attention." The people on the sidelines of life. I visited the Convent at Lauriston, here in Edinburgh. Sister Aelred is one of the Sisters of Mercy there. After returning from overseas missionary work in 1993 she started the homeless project. She has dedicated her life to the selfless championing of those who are the most disadvantaged and marginalized of our society. The people on the sidelines of life. A few days after Christmas the nuns offer hot food and drink and company to people from the street. They asked a few general questions of their guests as they came in, engaged with them personally, talked to them, paid attention to them. When the guests left after their meal, each was handed a carefully wrapped, individualised Christmas parcel. Some clothing, some food, something else to help. The people on the sidelines of life.

President Franklin D Roosevelt once said, "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have

too little." One of the tests of how real our Christian faith will be found in how we include the people on the sidelines of life. We cannot fix everything, but we can fix something. The Foodbank Harvest effort a month ago. The wonderful weekend next month for the Edinburgh Clothing Store where, though we will not know the names, we will know on those little labels for clothing something of the needs of those for whom we are privileged, literally, to put clothes on their backs.

There are other sidelines where we are called to go. The Wednesday Coffee morning regularly welcomes people who are on their own. So does Morningside Hope. And the Baby and Toddler Group, and the Wednesday Club. In our world there are many on the sidelines, isolated by age and frailty, poor physical or mental health, fearfulness, addiction, social awkwardness, a guilt held over from the past. We must always be going down into the valley of human need. Even if we are not wealthy we can be generous with our attention and affection. Our generosity is conveyed in time as much as money. So often we feel guilty about the immensity of suffering and fear and want in the world. Our goal is not to be paralyzed by guilt or hopelessness, but to replace that guilt with generosity. "We all have a natural desire to help and to care, and we simply need to allow ourselves to give from our love. We each must do what we can. This is all that God asks of us." – said Desmond Tutuⁱⁱⁱ

Bartimaeus asked for the gift of sight to be restored to him. "The cry of need that caused Bartimaeus to be shunned by many becomes the occasion for (a) glimpse of God's final intention for creation...This glimpse is called a miracle. Miracles are those events that bring people from darkness into the light. Miracles turn our attention to what really matters in life and in death. Miracles claim no power but reveal a Power Who wills to be known. Miracles point beyond the

one before us to the One who made us for love's sake. "Miracle as such, means the activity of God."^{iv}

Who are those on the sidelines of life? Who are those on the sidelines of your life, and why are they there? Can they be reached? Can they be included? Are they also children of God? If we cannot help, might others? It seems to me that our lives are filled with so many concentric circles, with people on the inside, and people on the outside. People who exclude themselves, and people we sometimes choose to exclude. On the road to Jerusalem, Jesus drew Bartimaeus from the sideline into the circle of healing and inclusion and love.

A final thought from Edwin Markham's poem, *Outwitted*.

*He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!*

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Leith Fisher, *'Will you follow Me?'* p151

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ Desmond Tutu, *God has a Dream*, pps 87-88

^{iv} Cynthia A Jarvis, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 4* p214 (and Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, p177)