

When I was a child, a neighbour had a cherry tree. On a good year she got to the fruit before the birds, and we got cherries to make pie.

It wouldn't have occurred to my mum to fiddle around stoning the cherries, so when you ate your slice you had to spit out the stones.

My sister and I would put them around the edge of our dish, then at the end we would play a game.

Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief. Whichever you landed on last was who you were going to marry.

Obviously, we always hoped for the rich man, not the poor man or the beggar man. However, as I am married to a bank manager and my sister to a civil servant I'm not sure the cherry stone predictions were entirely accurate.

Today's Gospel reading [Luke 6. 17-26] seems to turn on its head the view that being rich is a good thing. Society's belief is summed up in the words of Abba – money, money, money, always sunny, in a rich man's world. Yet in this reading it is the poor who are to be envied and the rich pitied.

To be frank, the words of today's Gospel make me feel really uncomfortable. I know I am not alone here. Passages such as this – blessed are the poor and woe to the rich - have made Christians anxious for centuries.

Indeed, my first panicky very selfish thought on today's Gospel is, 'What if I am rich'?

Now, I am not rich by English standards – I have no second home or Rolls Royce. But I know that compared to many in the world I am materially well off and I feel guilty when I think of the people who really are poor.

Those millions who have inadequate shelter, food, sanitation, education or medical care. Poverty and richness are comparative, and compared to much of the world I am very rich indeed. And I suspect that knowing you are blessed and will be rewarded in heaven is of little consolation when you are starving or homeless or dying from lack of medical care. The words 'blessed are the poor' were surely never intended to justify poverty. They are supposed to remind us that our God is a God who is to be found inside people's suffering. That he has a special place in his heart for the poor.

However, a literal reading of Jesus' words has prompted in some Christians an extreme fear that material possessions might deny them God's blessing.

For example, St Clare of Assisi, friend of St Francis, was from a very wealthy family. She was so concerned that this separated her from God, that she broke away from that family to live in poverty.

If you visit the church she shared with her sisters – still known today as the Poor Clares – you can see the patch of bare ground she slept

on. She denied herself regular meals, eating every other day. As a result, her health suffered and she died young.

Is such denial what is expected of us? Surely not. I think God wants the best for all of us. I don't think any of us believe he wants anyone to suffer. Beyond basic poverty, I also know that it is not for me to judge the quality of other people's lives. There might be many who do not envy the west our often frantic and pressurised lives.

However, that still leaves me feeling anxious about the fact my life is so comfortable, while I largely ignore the issue of world poverty because I know it is not in my power to solve it.

I am sure you remember the high hopes of the Make Poverty History campaign launched in 2005. The intention was to persuade western governments to alter their policies to help the poor of the developing world. In 2013 the faltering campaign was re-launched with the more modest and indeed achievable aim of providing enough food for everyone. The relaunch scarcely made a media splash.

As Jesus said 2,000 years ago in an entirely different context, "The poor are always with us". That is as true today as when he said it. Can humankind ever solve the problems of its own creating? It seems unlikely.

And in the face of the enormity of the problem we must all feel helpless, because the complexity and the scale of the issue of world poverty seems insurmountable. All we can do is put it in God's hands.

I am not being trite. That is not a simple or a small thing. It is the only solution, the only action, that means anything. Only prayer has a chance of finding any lasting solution. Only in the kingdom of God will poverty be made history.

However, as I reflected on the Gospel passage, I wondered what it might mean for us if it is not really about material poverty. If that is indeed too literal an interpretation.

We are told that Jesus is addressing these words to his disciples. Not to the multitude who have followed him in the hopes of hearing him speak or seeking healing. He is speaking to a 'great crowd of his disciples', preparing them for what is to come. Later they are instructed to go out and take nothing with them. To live on the willing hospitality of others. They will be poor, but their needs will it seems be met.

Much more importantly they will be poor in terms of their social standing. Their relationships will suffer. They will be reviled and hated, poor in the respect and love of others. Jesus is warning them that this is inevitable and that this poverty will be with them until their death. They will only become rich in the next life.

If the disciples were to be the poor, who were the rich? Presumably it was those disciples who in the end could not commit. Who were unwilling to become poor in the eyes of the world for Jesus' sake.

Where does that leave us? I think we must inevitably acknowledge that we remain poor in our knowledge and understanding of God. We must remain hungry, with a need to know more of God. We must weep for a world which suffers so greatly. We must speak of and uphold values which are counter-cultural. I guess that some people might view us as poor, because our lives are to some extent shaped and constrained by faith. People may well speak harshly of us or mock us. Does that make us poor or rich? I'll leave you to decide that one.

And, of course, poverty can mean much more than a lack of material wealth or even sacrifices made to follow Christ. Being people of faith, however great or small that faith may be, does not protect us from material poverty or from the many other forms which poverty can take.

In truth, every single one of us has areas of poverty in our lives.

It might be we have poor health, or poor hearing or even poor eye sight. It might be we feel educationally poor. It might be that we are aware we are poor listeners. Perhaps our ability to communicate with others is poor. Perhaps an important relationship is not as rich as we would wish it to be. We might feel poorly supported by others. We might feel spiritually poor. That we can't pray properly, or that we don't believe what everyone seems to expect us to believe.

Every single one of us has areas of poverty.

But the thing is, today's reading [Jeremiah 17. 5-10] tells us that each area of our poverty is blessed by God. Every single thing we feel we lack, means God blesses us and loves us in our poverty.

Blessed are the poor, Jesus says. Loved are the poor. Cherished are the poor. Valued are the poor.

Because God is with us in our respective poverties, our guilt, our hunger and our tears. He is with us in the poverty we cannot change and the poverty we can try to do something about.

In the pain, the suffering, the knowledge that we lack something important, in all our poverty, God is to found. And that is why our poverty is blessed.