

# Homily Notes

A RESOURCE FOR WORKING NOTES 83: HARM OF INACTION

---

written by **Kevin Hargaden**, Social Theologian JCFJ

Sundays February 10th, 17th, 25th, and March 3rd 2019



The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, based in Dublin 1, works to combat injustice and marginalisation in Irish society, through social analysis, theological reflection, public awareness raising, and advocacy. The Centre highlights complex social issues, informs opinion, and advocates for governmental policy change to create a fair and equitable society for all. One of the main channels through which it achieves this aim is its journal **Working Notes** ([www.workingnotes.ie](http://www.workingnotes.ie)), which seeks to bring facts and analysis of social and economic issues to bear on the matters of most pressing concern in Irish society.

### **WorkingNotes.ie**

Our most recent edition, Issue 83, deals with the theme of the Harm of Inaction. It features articles from experts around Europe that reflect on harm in the light of the Centre's four focus areas: penal policy, environmental justice, economic ethics, and housing and homelessness. While our work has a wide and appreciative readership within government, the senior civil service, and the non-governmental organisation sector, it is not always so effective at reaching the ordinary Christian in a pew on a Sunday. We know that there is a growing hunger among the faithful to be informed about social justice and to see how it connects their everyday life to their faith. With the hope of helping meet that hunger, we have prepared these homily notes, inspired by Working Notes, which we hope will allow parishes to engage with the themes explored in this issue, in the light of the lectionary.

The hope is that these notes might serve as a jumping off point as you prepare a homily. As they stand, the homilies would be about four minutes long if replicated in their entirety. Of course, some people would want to adapt and supplement, or indeed cut and edit. Whatever suits in a local place is appropriate!

Very often, homily notes that seek to draw out justice themes end up prioritising social issues at the expense of the Gospel message. We seek to avoid that situation by pairing each week's readings with an essay from the latest issue.

On February 10th, when we have the great story of the abundant fishing haul from Luke 5, we recommend reflecting on the fundamental message of Sheelah Connolly's piece on universal healthcare. Our current health system is determined by a belief in scarcity. We do not quite trust that we have what it takes to care for everyone. But as Dr. Connolly shows, it would actually make us more prosperous if we committed to trust in the abundance of our own resources and dedicating ourselves to offering healthcare that was free to everyone in Ireland at the point of access.

The subsequent weeks are similarly combined with a piece from the journal. On February 17th we read the blessings and woes from Luke 6 in the light of the lifelong trauma often associated with homelessness, which Dalma Fabian has explored for us. On February 24th we find resonances between Jesus' teaching on loving enemies with Tim Chapman's essay on restorative justice. In the final week of our notes, March 3rd, we move beyond the superficial readings of the speck/log-in-the-eye passage to use it to think about our collective confusion around climate breakdown, which is echoed in the essay by Thomas L. Muinzer on Irish responses.

We hope these notes provoke good thoughts and are helpful in the hard process of writing homilies which connect contemporary Irish life with the vital message of the Gospel.

**COMPANION PIECE: WHAT HARM A POOR HEALTHCARE SYSTEM?**

BY SHEELAH CONNOLLY

**1ST READING:** ISAIAH 6:1-8**RESPONSORIAL:** PSALM 137:1-5, 7-8**2ND READING:** 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11**GOSPEL:** LUKE 5:1-11

I love this story. Luke tells us that the crowd flocking to hear Jesus's teaching grew so large that there was simply no room. Jesus improvises a solution by setting out a bit from the shore in a boat. It's important to note that Luke tells us where this was. Along that lakeshore are a series of inlets which zigzag so as to create a natural amphitheatre. Pilgrims to this day can experience how a person speaking normally in a boat set out a little in the sea can be heard all the way up the slope of the shore. Such geographic details litter the gospels, testifying to their origin in the historic recollections of real eye-witnesses, whose testimonies were preserved.

When he finished his sermon, or lecture, or stand-up show – I am not quite sure which genre best captures what Jesus must have done – he asked the fishermen, who had finished their overnight shift, to go to work again. This would have seemed absurd to all who knew that industry. Fish are hard to catch in the heat of the middle eastern day – that's why the fishermen did their work at night. And on this day, right after a night where the catch was so dismal? Who does this Jesus think he is? Peter pleads with him to see sense: "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing."

What happens? The nets fill with fish; so many fish that the very nets bulge and when the catch is hauled overboard, the weight of the load drops the boats deeper into the water than any fisherman would want to be. Peter, ever the decisive leader, reacts faster than everyone else, but surely the entire crowd had a similar response. The man who could generate such a surplus, after a night of scarcity, is no mere carpenter's son. "Go away from me!" is a natural cry of the soul in the face of such eerie power.

The scene is famous in the history of the Gospels because of Jesus' response. "You have been a fisherman, now you will fish for men." It is easy to miss the drama of what has happened behind Luke's sparse prose. Peter, along with his

business partners James and John, brought their boats to shore and "left everything and followed him". They left their business, which they must have inherited and painstakingly built up, shuttered by that shore. They left their relationships and comforts and home. We shift from "away from me" to "follow him" in a few short sentences, because once the shock wore off and once they had understood what they saw, they realised that the world was not the way they thought it was.

Jesus' miracles are always called "signs" and "wonders" in the Gospels. They are not magic tricks to entertain. They point to something. They reveal something. They expose reality for how it really is. Every single person on that shore shared the same assumption every single person in this room shares: that the world is scarce and you have to fight for everything you have. This is a delusion. Jesus' sign points to the reality of things: the world is abundant, and if we stopped fighting for our own slice and instead relaxed into sharing, there would be more than enough for all. This is true for fish and food, for housing and healthcare, for every good thing we need. How can you, this week, experiment with the idea that the world is not scarce?

**COMPANION PIECE: LIFELONG HARM OF TRAUMA AND HOMELESSNESS**

BY DALMA FABIAN

**1ST READING: JEREMIAH 17:5-8****RESPONSORIAL: PSALM 1:1-4****2ND READING: 1 CORINTHIANS 15:12, 16-20****GOSPEL: LUKE 6:17, 20-26**

Our Gospel reading today will be familiar to you – the blessings that Jesus pronounces continue to have a profound social significance. The world thinks that the rich are blessed. Jesus says that from God’s perspective, it is the poor who are blessed. His list continues in such a surprising fashion – those who are hungry, those who are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed. These are the people who should rejoice and leap for joy.

Against this, in words that should strike many in Ireland with fear, Jesus says that those who are rich, whose bellies are full, who laugh easy and are spoken well of everywhere they go – these are the people who should be worried.

What are we to make of this upside-down list? We are heartened by the idea that there would be consolation to those who mourn and comfort for those who are experiencing poverty. But we are not quite so eager to hear the second part of this message. If this is an uncomfortable message for you this morning, I encourage you to reflect on why that is this week. Might it be true that we have absorbed the mistaken idea that if things are going well for us, it must be because we somehow deserve it, that it is something we have earned. We like that idea because it imagines God owes us our due.

In reality, Jesus is gently breaking the truth to us. We can’t treat God like our debtor – which is often how the world treats those who are poor and hungry, mourning and excluded – and he does not treat us like his workers. He doesn’t give us our due. He gives us much more than we deserve, or can earn, or are entitled to!

That is why Jesus issues the blessings to those who are poor and reserves the woes for those who are well off. God loves all people with an infinite, unwavering love, but he has a particular interest in those who are poor and marginalised. Theologians call this God’s “preferential option” for the poor. The promise that the poor will receive their reward in heaven is no invitation to ignore the need to meet their needs here and now. Rather, it is a recognition that the trauma that poverty and homelessness, grief and suffering inflict on us can often not be cured and made right in this life.

For those who are heavily burdened by loss and who are struggling to make ends meet, there is great consolation in this morning’s readings. Paul, in the second reading, underlines the basic truth of Christianity: In fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is not in the tomb. He is alive. God is alert to your suffering. He sees with perfect justice and mercy. He sees your suffering and he intends to make it good. Your neighbours sitting around you can offer assistance today and tomorrow, but there is hope even for the trauma and agony that persists.

So, this is our work for the week: In God’s Kingdom, the world is upside-down. The rich are poor, the poor are honoured, the first last and the last first. How can you act to bring your life into harmony with that divine reality?

**COMPANION PIECE: A MORE HUMANE APPROACH TO ADDRESSING HARM**

BY TIM CHAPMAN

**1ST READING:** 1 SAMUEL 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23**RESPONSORIAL:** PSALM 102:1-4, 8, 10, 12-13**2ND READING:** 1 CORINTHIANS 15:45-49**GOSPEL:** LUKE 6:27-38

Whether you go down to the Supreme Court or up to the local creche, all of human society seems to operate from an understanding of justice that is about retribution. You did this to me, so I do that to you. The toddlers fighting over a toy truck and the barristers fighting over some lofty corporate crime – they all imagine that the misdeed can be undone by an equal, yet opposite counter-deed.

We might call this the “pool table understanding of justice”. If you have played pool or snooker or billiards, you know what I am talking about. Justice is about restoring balance by exerting just the right force to bring everything into harmony.

One of the problems with this understanding of justice is that those who do the mis-deeds are knocked off the table! On a communal level we knock those who do wrong out of sight into prison and on a personal level we often exclude those who do wrong against us. There are times and situations where this is the only possible option, but if it becomes our habit, either as a society or as individuals, we will grow hard and callous.

Our readings this morning propose another understanding of justice. It is not the case that Jesus rejects the “pool table understanding” – there is no doubt that God sees all that is wrong with the world and he cannot ignore it. He wants recompense. But the understanding of justice preached by Jesus goes beyond the pool table. It transcends the approach to justice found in the creches and in the courts. He introduces something into the equation that changes the game entirely.

With his talk of radical generosity, radical forgiveness, and radical mercy – give to everyone who asks, bless those who curse you, love your enemies – he creates a context where life is no longer about winners and losers, the good and the bad, the in and the out, but where no one is ever excluded, knocked off the board, locked up without hope.

This is immensely challenging stuff. It is fair to say that the very heart of Christianity – its unique selling point – is this focus on forgiveness. More than any other philosophy or religion or way of life, Christianity is concerned with redemption, reconciliation, rejuvenation. It is not just justice. It is mercy. It is not justice against mercy. It is justice finding its fullness because of mercy.

When Jesus calls us to give without expectation of getting it back again, he is just telling us to repeat to others what God has already done to us. When he calls us to bless those who curse us, he is just telling us to repeat to others what God has already done to us. When he calls us to love our enemies, he is just telling us to repeat to others what God has already done to us. We receive God’s mercy and that changes how we think about justice. Although not always possible, we now seek a justice that does more than punishes, but instead restores.

How can you seek such mercy for yourself this week? How can you show it to others?



---

**COMPANION PIECE: REFLECTIONS ON IRELAND'S RESPONSE TO POTENTIALLY IRREVERSIBLE CLIMATE CHANGE BY THOMAS L. MUINZER****1ST READING: SIRACH 27:4-7****RESPONSORIAL: PSALM 91:2-3, 13-16****2ND READING: 1 CORINTHIANS 15:54-58****GOSPEL: LUKE 6:39-45**

Autumn a year ago, Ireland's shores were battered by a tropical storm. This time last year, we were grounded under historic amounts of snow. Last summer, we had to ration water because of the heatwave. In recent weeks, Australia endured temperatures so high, human life was put at risk and America endured temperatures so low, human life was imperilled. It is too simple to equate these increasingly common extreme weather events with what has come to be known as "climate breakdown", but they are undoubtedly a key aspect of what is unfolding. More importantly, the extreme weather events are signs that we can see, within a context where the problem is so large and so complex that very often our convictions are faith-based. Of course, to say something is faith-based is not to suggest it is not true! It simply means we trust the scientists who say the coral reefs are dying, that the insects are dying, that the glaciers are melting and the seas are toxifying – but all these alarming signals are things we as individuals cannot make sense of.

We can make sense of water shortages and snow so heavy it is like a wall around our house.

When I read today's Gospel, I think of climate breakdown. Or more specifically, I think of how I find it so hard to wrap my head around climate breakdown. I don't know about you, but I really like our modern way of life. I like owning a car and eating meat every day and flying off somewhere sunny in the summer – or even better, in the depths of winter.

I read the newspapers and listen to the scientists say that all this wealth and luxury has had dire consequences but I can't make their points connect with my experience. How can cattle herds be a bad thing? Why would it really make a difference if I started walking to the shops instead of driving?

There is a sense in which we are confused by the scale of the problem because it is so huge that none of us can take it all in. But is there not also an aspect where this is exactly an example of what Jesus is talking about with the speck in the neighbour's eye while we have a log in our own? Our way of life blinds us to the way in which we are now in the place where we cannot help ourselves, never mind offer advice to others. We pat ourselves on the back for being so well off, but we are blind to how the means of our prosperity – burning carbon – has set us up for a cataclysmic impoverishment. This is the wisdom in Jesus' second teaching. Each tree is known by its fruit. If climate breakdown is the harvest we receive from our way of life, doesn't that tell us whether things are good or bad?

Lots of nonsense is spoken about climate breakdown, but here we have a sure foundation. Unless our way of life leads to flourishing for all the rest of God's creation, we must seek another way. How can we remove the log that blinds us from seeing this truth? For this wisdom, we must pray...