



Module 3: Just Bible



Aims of the module

- To explore the importance of “poverty” in the Bible and then to relate this to our own lives.



Notes for group leaders

This module is designed to get your group to engage with and explore what the Bible has to say about poverty, and make a personal response. It will examine passages and perspectives from both Old and New Testaments. There are three activities, some of which provide a choice in the type of activity so that the group facilitator or the group themselves can decide beforehand which is more suitable for them.



Resources required

- A projector or OHP for the slides or *PowerPoint* presentation.
- Bibles.
- Enough copies of the handouts for everybody to have one.



Extras

There is one Extra available from www.justchurch.info to accompany this module:

- A set of **additional notes** on the issues covered in the module. This is designed to help you to introduce the module. You can, of course, reproduce it as a handout if you wish.

Remember, you can run the module without using the Extras at all. Only use them if you want to explore the topic more deeply.

Just Church: facilitator sheet



Opening worship (10 minutes)

Use the outline from the worship resources for this module, or plan your own worship.



Activity 1: The Bible and the poor (10 minutes)

Ask the group to read through the text on Handout 1, and in pairs discuss the question for five minutes. At the end of these five minutes, ask the group to come together to share whatever they feel comfortable in sharing with the rest of the group.



Activity 2: God and the poor (30 minutes)

For this activity, distribute Handout 2. It includes a brief summary of certain Bible passages that relate to poverty in both the Old and New Testaments, and could act as a useful prompt for members of the group who cannot quote chapter and verse from memory.

Once again, ask the group to read through the text and answer the questions in pairs. However, wait until they have finished discussing the third question before inviting feedback. You do not need to dissect each question thoroughly as a group as this will take up too much time, but it is still productive to let the group exchange views with each other concerning their discussions of the topic.



Activity 3: A living Bible study (20 minutes)

This is a simple exercise to help us understand what is going on in a well-known passage of scripture by using our imagination. It helps us to glimpse some things we may have missed in the past!

Cut up a copy of Handout 3 so that each person can have one of the slips of paper with background notes about a character in the story: a different character for each member of the group. If there are more in the group than there are characters, then have pairs of people “share” characters.

The Bible passage is the healing of the leper in Mark 1:40–44. (The story continues into verse 45, but just use this first part of it.) Ask someone to read the story aloud and slowly for the group. Then hand the slips of paper out. Give people time to digest what it says about their character.

Now read the story again very slowly, pausing at the end of each verse. Ask people to be aware of every word that is read. They are asked to imagine what their character in the story is feeling at each moment in the story and how other people are treating them. What is happening to them? What does it feel like?

After you have read the story slowly the second time, ask people to sit quietly reflecting on what their character has experienced. Then invite them to share this with the group. At the end, each person needs to hand back their slip of paper: just to make sure they stop being the character in the story!

After the exercise, ask:

- What two things Jesus did Jesus do?
- What did he do to the religious law of purity?
- What effect did this have on a man condemned to utter poverty by his skin condition?
- What effect did his action have on Jesus’ own religious purity?
- And on his relationship with the religious leaders?

Just Church: facilitator sheet

- How do we exclude people today? Think of ways this impoverishes them. Think how the labels we stick on people help us to overlook the injustice they suffer. Especially those who are poor and powerless.
- In real life how do we behave?
- Does this feel like the behaviour of any of the characters in the story?



Action points (10 minutes)

Help the group to decide how they can put their learning into some sort of action. Ask: How can our church reflect and use the Bible's teaching on poverty more effectively? Which areas are we already doing well at, and which areas need improvement?

Be sure to note down the ideas that emerge – you'll come back to them in the "Just Action" module.



Closing worship (10 minutes)

On the *Just Church* website or DVD, you will find a *PowerPoint* presentation for the closing worship, that you can choose to show on a laptop with a projector, or as a slide show on an overhead projector.

After the presentation has finished there is the option to finish with a prayer, included in the worship resources section of this module, that is led by the group facilitator. The 'A' and 'B' for the closing litany could either be women and men, or two different readers.

You might also want to say the *Just Church* prayer (see the introduction) together to end the session.

Suggested further reading

- *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* by Samuel Escobar
- *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* by Ronald J Sider
- *Christians and Poverty Discussion Guide* from the Sojourners community
- *The Soul of Politics* by Jim Wallis
- *Theological wordbook of the Old Testament* from Moody Press
- *Experiments with Bible Study* by Hans Rudi Weber



The Bible

In the Bible we meet the tough questions of human existence, of personal and social ethics, of economic and political power struggles, of human suffering, of legislation and exploitation. In the Bible we encounter the living God who acts in history and in our life. We should read the Bible to be changed.

Question: What Bible passages do you remember that express God's concern for those on the margins of our society?

The Bible and the Poor

Jim Wallis describes how a group of theological students decided to identify every biblical reference to the poor and oppressed, and discovered hundreds of such verses. Wallis describes one colleague who decided to cut out every reference to the poor from an old Bible. When he had finished, his Bible disintegrated. Those who are marginalised and forgotten by everyone else, those who are mistreated and abandoned on the bottom of society, keep appearing throughout the Bible as a central concern.

In the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), the poor are a prominent theme, and in the New Testament there are many verses about the poor, which are the primary focus for Jesus' ministry (Luke 4:16–21).

The Hebrew term for the poor, *anawim*, has also been translated as “the humble” and “the meek”. In the Hebrew Bible “the poor” refers to: the oppressed, the downtrodden, the humiliated, the powerless, the dispossessed, the destitute, the impoverished, the defenceless, the dependent and the needy. The poor in the Bible aren't just the economically disadvantaged.

“Any declaration of the Gospel which does not include good news for the poor is not the Gospel.

There are 2000+ verses in Scripture that speak about the poor and the only mention of judgement day in Scripture is all about how we treat the poor, the sick and the homeless.

The Jubilee of Jesus is to reach out to the poor, to minister healing, and to deliver the oppressed.”

Tony Campolo



God's bias to the poor

God is given many names throughout the scriptures, and many of these names emphasise the divine love for the poor:

- **Defender** of the fatherless and widows (Deuteronomy 10:18; Psalm 10:16–18; 40:17, 68:5; Jeremiah 22:16);
- **Protector** of the poor (Psalm 12:5);
- **Rescuer** of the poor (1 Samuel 2:8, Psalm 35:10, 72:4, 12–14, Isaiah 19:20, Jeremiah 20:13);
- **Provider** for the poor (Psalm 68:10, 146:7, Isaiah 41:17);
- **Saviour** of the poor (Psalm 34:6, 109:31)
- **Refuge** of the poor (Psalm 14:6, Isaiah 25:4).

For those who bless the poor, God promises **blessing** (Psalm 41:1–3; 112; Proverbs 14:21; 19:17, 22:9, 14:31, 28:27; Isaiah 58:6–10). God also promises to **judge** those who oppress the poor (Deuteronomy 27:19, Proverbs 17:5, 21:13, 22:16, 28:27; Isaiah 10:1–4; Ezekiel 18:12–13, 16:49).

Question: Some theologians have suggested that God is biased in favour of the poor. What themes or texts in the Bible support this idea? Share in the group the Bible references about God's concern. Ask people to read some out.

Question: How do we know that Jesus experienced poverty and what his attitude was to the poor and powerless? How did he take up the Old Testament's call for generous compassion and its concern for justice? What did Jesus have in mind when he said that we will always have the poor with us? (Deuteronomy 15, by contrast, observes that there should be “no poor among you”.)

Reading: Mark 7:24–30

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is regularly challenged by the civil and religious authorities, but this passage gives us the story of someone from the “margins” who wins a debate with Jesus. Normally Jesus is presented as an outsider who challenged the numerous prejudices and assumptions of others; however, in this story he is the one with power and privilege. The woman he encounters was a poor Canaanite woman, with little social status. She was also the mother of an unclean daughter, with the result that she herself would be considered religiously “unclean”.

Mark's Gospel initially presents Jesus as reluctant and a little hostile to the woman. But he is open to the influence of someone whom others would despise and reject. Every society has people on its margins. Such people may be there for racial, tribal, cultural, gender, or religious reasons. They may be the sick, the aged or the mentally ill. Numerically they may not even make up a minority of their community. The Syro-Phoenician woman reminds us that those excluded from the social mainstream, may be more insightful than people who have power, status and privilege.

Question: The Church's “option for the poor” is a recognition that the Church, like Jesus, should be always open to the influence and experience of the poor. What delusions might the poor free us from?



Jesus

Jesus is a teacher with a difference. He has frequently been in conflict with the authorities for breaking the religious law: especially the law of purity under which a person should avoid contact with sinful or unclean people. Many of the poor were destitute and homeless and were unable to keep the religious laws. They were condemned as being sinners. Jesus said he had been sent by God to proclaim good news to the poor and destitute.

The leper

Leprosy is highly infectious. He is “unclean” both in the physical sense of having a disease and in the religious sense, and is therefore excluded from the worshipping community. Because of the fear others have of catching the disease, he is an outcast. No-one should go near him or associate with him. Who would marry him – or even touch him? He is made to carry a bell to warn people to keep away from him. How does he earn a living? How does he survive? He is the poorest of the poor. His life is a living hell. Where is the justice in this: did he choose to be a leper?

The religious leader

The religious leaders feel threatened by Jesus. He speaks with authority – but he breaks the rules. God’s rules. He champions those whom the religious leaders reject as worthless and unclean. Wealth is concentrated in the hands of a powerful minority, including the clergy. So any talk of good news for the poor threatens their vested interests. But above all they are concerned that the religious law is kept – in every detail. They often keep watch on Jesus to see what he is up to and to find a way of getting rid of this threat to their status and power. They are not present at the healing: but Jesus tells the leper to go and show them (or at least one of them) what has happened and ask for formal certification of cleanliness. What is the priest’s reaction likely to be?

The disciples

The women and men who follow Jesus are inspired by his words and actions – but they are also a bit apprehensive. He seems to walk straight into danger and confrontation. They love him and they want him to be safe. They know the powerful religious leaders are watching his every move, looking for a way to get rid of him. As the leper approaches everything seems to be normal. His is ringing his bell so that no-one will go near him and be defiled. He speaks to Jesus. Jesus seems angry about something. And then he does something outrageous...

The crowd (two or three people could share these characters)

They are a very mixed bunch. Some are simply passers-by catching sight of an unusual visitor. Some have heard about this strange young man who attracts so much attention. They hear the leper’s bell ringing and draw back in case they are defiled. But they stay close enough to see what happens. They burst out laughing when they hear what he says to Jesus: they know the old saying that it is easier to raise the dead than to heal a leper. But they stop laughing when they see what happens next...



Opening worship

Song (or spoken prayer)

Whisper words of truth in my heart
for you alone speak truth (repeat)

This refrain from a song by Philip Jakob with a text by St Augustine of Hippo appears on the CTBI website resources for the 2008 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (www.ctbi.org.uk). The whole song with verses and an optional use of the plainchant “Ubi Caritas” is available from Philip Jakob directly (Philip.Jakob@stmariecathedral.org).

Reflection

“Are you listening? Then I’ll begin.”

These familiar words are from *Listen with Mother*, a radio programme from a few years ago which informed many young minds. The story-teller checked first that we were attentive and then proceeded with her tale.

We all know how frustrating it is when it becomes clear that the person to whom we are talking has “glazed over” and is not giving us full attention. “Look at me when I’m talking to you!” may be another familiar admonition from parents or teachers.

God must get just as frustrated with us today as in the past. God speaks and we sometimes don’t listen. We hear sounds, but the fact that sometimes we cannot replay the Word of God moments later indicates that we may not have been fully concentrating.

God cries out in frustration: “Oh that today you would listen to my voice, Harden not your hearts.”

There is something about our attitude to the Word of God which needs to change to be alive and searching. Destitute asylum-seekers and those who live with grinding poverty may know well their daily needs and their need of God. Who else can they turn to? Perhaps for those of us who are materially comfortable there is not the despair which prompts the search for or dependence on anyone, let alone on God? This might be our poverty.

The philosopher Paul Tillich said, “there is no depth unless there is a way into the depth”. The God who knows all that we are invites us as individuals to listen to the stories and wisdom of the past, and to join in the conversation in the present tense as though our lives depended on it.



Reading

Let us listen to the word of God:

Long silence (for folk to develop a thirst!)

My brothers and sisters, do you
with your acts of favouritism
really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly,
And if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in,
And if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say,
“Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say,
“Stand there,” or “Sit at my feet,”
Have you not made distinctions among yourselves,
And become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters.

Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith
And to be heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him?
But you have dishonoured the poor.
Is it not the rich who oppress you?
Is it not they who drag you into court?
Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture,
“You shall love your neighbour as yourself”.

James 2:1–8

Song

Sing “Lord, your word shall guide us” (tune “Ravenshaw”, as in number 978 of the hymnbook *Laudate*).

Rather than singing the whole hymn, perhaps just sing a few times the first verse in Michael Perry’s amended version:

Lord, your word shall guide us,
and with truth provide us:
teach us to receive it
and with joy believe it.



Closing worship

Because the scriptures spend so much time on the poor, we should too. This is the most important political issue in the Bible, and it must be ours as well. Religious action is rooted in a much deeper place than “rights” because of our belief that the image of God is in every human being.

*During this prayer, you could run the closing worship PowerPoint presentation from the **Just Church** website or DVD.*

Leader: The Lord is near to the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit. (Psalm 34:18)

A: Who are the poor?

B: They are the people we don't like to think about.

A: We can see them in the street or on the TV.

B: They are the people who have nothing, when extravagant consumption is everything.

A: The world is divided into people who have all they need and a majority in need.

B: They are the excluded looking in and, if we are on the inside, we build barriers.

A: Inside our walls are the people who are like “us”, who speak the “right” language, follow the “right” religion and have enough to be consumers.

A: But God has revealed Himself to us in Jesus who was poor.

B: Born with no place to call home,

A: Making friends amongst the poor and rejected

B: Living his life with no place to call “home”.

A: Challenging unjust ways and teaching us to share.

B: Giving his life as a homeless preacher.

A: Creator God, in Jesus we see you.

B: Are there so many barriers in our lives and in our hearts that we are too afraid to meet him?

All: **We pray for open hearts and minds and that we make room for all.**

Dear Lord

Help us to follow your example by looking out for those who each day feel that they are marginalised, who cannot find hope, who believe that they have little to offer, who are overcome by the challenges of poverty.

Help us to widen our horizons, to make space for the stranger, to watch out for those who feel invisible, to give time to the outsider, to talk to the person facing silence, to restore justice and value. Give us the courage to undertake this, the determination to join with others in seeing grace in every human face, the faith to embrace the opportunity in your name.

Amen

A prayer for justice from the Church Urban Fund