

END CHILD POVERTY FAST

A Sample Sermon for Churches Involved in a Fast to End Child Poverty

Suggested Readings: *Isaiah 58: 6-10; Matthew 25: 31-46*

*I watched her go uncelebrated into the second grade,
a greenless child,
gray among the orange and yellow,
attached too much to corners
and to other people's sunshine.
She colours the rainbow brown
and leaves balloons unopened in their packages.
Oh, who will touch this greenless child...
and send her dancing into all the colours of God?¹*

'Children who colour the rainbow brown' - they are our focus, during these days when we ask each other to pray, to fast, to care, to act, to give, that we may 'end child poverty fast'.

'To fast'. What does that mean to you? Does it suggest a religious practice that smacks uncomfortably of overt piety, of practices not many follow these days when 'fast' reminds us more of MacDonald's than of discipline or denial? Yet, to fast, this week, is to imply solidarity with that child who colours the rainbow brown, because sometimes her mother doesn't have enough food to give her, because she can't have a pizza on pizza day, because some days of the month she knows that even if she has food for lunch, someone else in her family will not eat, or they will have to make a trip to the Food Bank on Saturday morning.

'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice?'(Is. 58: 6)

The question in Isaiah comes from one who assumes prophetic authority to speak on behalf of God. Here is the prophet's concern with the relationship between religious practices and the moral life, the life of faith. The prophet seems to share what might be heard as 21st century skepticism about fasts: in verse 4, we hear: 'Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.' Perhaps those who fast do not take what they are doing seriously. Perhaps the fast has become an empty ritual.

Then, those powerful questions: *'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house... Is not this the fast that I choose?'*

All these questions expect a positive response. All point to one imperative: to care for the poor, to free them from oppression, from all that poverty does to 'colour the rainbow brown', to dictate that children will grow 'greenless', rather than multi-hued.
Who will send her dancing into all the colours of God?

*Or will she be left like an unwrapped package on
the kitchen table-
too dull for anyone to take the trouble?*

¹From US Catholic resources for National Children's Day; reprinted in *Keeping Our Promise to Children* a Multi-faith Resource Kit on poverty affecting children.

*Does God think we're her keeper?*²

Isaiah's questions must be answered: 'We will send her dancing', and 'Yes, God thinks we are her keeper'!

Those questions haunt the very air we breathe in religious life, pointing people of faith - of many faiths - toward a sense of social responsibility which upholds justice as the prerequisite of worship. In Jewish tradition, on Yom Kippur, in the Christian lectionary, on Ash Wednesday - on these holy of holy days, Isaiah's questions rise up from our sacred texts, to ask that we connect faith with justice, with compassion, with a moral response to the world in which we live.

November, 1989: we have all heard how a resolution was unanimously passed by the Canadian House of Commons: *This House... seek(s) to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000.*

It seemed that the Canadian government was choosing to act 'fast', to choose 'loosing the bonds of injustice', the fast described in Isaiah. But the political will to implement that decision was not strong enough, despite the promises, in the ensuing years in which Canada moved through recession and prosperity, through deficits and surpluses.

*Who will touch the greenless children,
and work to see that every child enters school
ready to learn, with strong early childhood experiences
that are safe and nurturing?*

The Government said, on behalf of the people, 'We will.'

*Who will support families in times of crisis,
so that needs of children will not be neglected?*

The Government said, on behalf of the people, 'We will.'

*Who will work to involve the whole community -- health-care providers, police,
social-service agencies, neighbourhood groups, voluntary organizations,
and others -- to see that children get what they need
to learn and succeed in school and beyond?*

The Government said, on behalf of the people, 'We will.'

But, by 2000, in Canada, the number of poor children was up 55% from 1989 - children living in working poor families up 55%, in unaffordable housing up 91%, in poor 2-parent families up 55%, in lone-parent families up 49%. In 1989, about 1 child in 7 was poor, according to low-income cut-off figures defined by Statistics Canada. By 2000, 1 child in 5 lived in poverty, an increase in real numbers of 402,000. By 2005, that number was still 1 child in 6.

For many, the line between enough and not enough is very thin. A story: '*Charles, Maria and three children, ages nine months to seven years, live in a two-bedroom rental unit in downtown Toronto. Charles, a skilled tradesman, had a full-time job until the firm he worked for went belly-up. While he looks for another job, both he and his wife work part-time and share child-care responsibilities. Their monthly take-home pay is less than \$1500. To make ends meet, they've cancelled cable, given up the car, and most recently, the family dental and drug plan that cost more than \$100 a month. Last year*

²Ibid.

*with one child in grade one, they could still afford school snack programs and field trips, but they're not sure how they will manage now that their second son has begun school. 'We put the kids before everything and just take a day at a time,' says Charles. 'Our family has the important things: a roof, health and strength.'*³

A cartoon by Ben Wicks put it eloquently: 'You don't have to visit the third world' to see and experience child poverty.

Consequences for children living in poverty are clear; in almost every indicator of well-being, they fare worse than other kids. Poverty is feeling ashamed, sensing family strain when the school requests money for activities, being teased, pretending you forgot your lunch, being less healthy than other kids.

It is time to act to end child poverty - fast. What we need is a comprehensive solution, federal and provincial. What can we do? Pray, phone, fast, fax or e-mail government representatives, both provincial and federal. Get the message through.

'Is not this the fast that I choose? Isaiah's questions echo through millennia. Matthew's gospel shows us Jesus teaching that those questions matter - enough to warrant judgment. Did you feed, clothe, welcome? 'Truly, I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

In Jesus' description the promise of life replaces the threat of death when we actively engage in feeding, giving drink, welcoming, when we turn from neglect to compassion. Those whom Jesus judges are surprised, whether rewarded or condemned: *When did we do such deeds to you? When you served the weakest and neediest.'*

The God of Isaiah and of Jesus is the God we recognize when we realize that child poverty is the poverty of a family, the poverty of a community, the poverty of a nation, when we remember that God does not want a growing gap between rich and poor.

The God of Isaiah and of Jesus is the God whose compassion transcends the boundaries human beings erect, who shows us that our lives and our families are connected with the lives and families of the least of our sisters and brothers.

What can we do? Send a message to public leaders. End child poverty fast. Make child poverty in Canada a thing of the past. Let us enable every child to reach his or her potential. Let us invest in Canada's children. Then we, too, will know what Isaiah meant: *'Is not this the fast that I choose?... Then your gloom will be like the noonday.'*

And the 'greenless child' may no longer 'turn the rainbow brown'. May it be so. Amen.

³From 'Small Faces, Big Numbers', a portrait of child poverty in Canada, found in the multi-faith resource kit, [Keeping Our Promise to Children](#).