

The textual pull of old rags

In a book written many centuries before Hilda established her monastery for monks and nuns at Whitby, and hundreds of miles from Reinfrid's twelfth-century ruins, the thirty-eighth chapter of Jeremiah tells the story of the prophet being thrown into a deep cistern, to die of hunger and thirst when his enemies judged his message subversive. As Jeremiah was being sucked into the mud, encrusted with the wet earth of time, his voice muted by the echoes of that dank, hollow, space, an imperial servant snuck out in the night with a pile of old rags and worn-out clothes to rescue him. The servant must have tied the rags and clothes together; perhaps he made a loop at the end as a handhold as he passed them down into the cistern so that the prophet might use to pad the rope as he bound it around himself. Perhaps he found a spot of firm ground some distance away to give himself leverage, stabilizing himself and the rope against some solid object--a tree? a wall?--to ensure a secure, steady pull that would not land them both in the mud. When all was ready, he lowered the rags into the pit, had Jeremiah fix himself to the other end; then took position and pulled. Both soon stood on solid ground, the voice of the preacher once again a force for reckoning with the world.

This image--of using old rags, a firm, steady grip, good leverage, and an attachment to conventional structures for the purpose of righting imbalances, of bringing suppressed voices up from the earth to speak into the present--has always been a very powerful metaphor for me. It inspires the work that I do in the history of the early church. And among the voices from the past that have been left in (or thrown into) the dark storage places of the earth and left unnoticed, unheard, there have been, until quite recently, a number of early Christian texts about poverty, need, hunger, physical sickness, and other social calamities. Because these texts often existed only in Greek, Latin, Syriac and Coptic, those who study modern medicine, national and international public health, policy issues, and social services--that is, those who might find them most interesting--often knew nothing about them. Because such texts were, like the proverbial prophet, coated with the material of everyday social circumstances, the "scum" of a very earthy past, many theologians and classicists who had the necessary language skills to edit and translate them, tended to overlook them to follow more "philosophical" or "theological" agendas. As a result, in the long and tangled web of discourse over theology, "orthodoxy," "heresy," and even discussions of the body, many of our religious texts on wealth and poverty, written, preached, and applied in the centuries between the New Testament and the medieval era of St. Francis of Assisi, have got short shrift. Who knows, for example, that the "Great Orphanage" that trained some of ancient Byzantium's best musicians, theological leaders and administrators, probably had its roots in an Arian or "heretical" foundation? Or that some of the most beautiful poetry to equate the poor with Christ and the earth is from a Syriac author once marginalized (in the west, at least) as heterodox? Who in the Latin-speaking west during the Middle Ages remembered the classically "orthodox" sermons in Greek from Cappadocia with their vivid depictions of

leprosy, obscene wealth, greed, and starvation? A monk here and there, perhaps, copying and translating a rare manuscript in a cold library. One or two sentences crept into papal decrees but few later sermons tell us how these earlier writings might have been used in practice. Except, of course, crafty John Chrysostom, a fourth-century monk-bishop, who littered every sentence so densely with comments on the poor that, until the computer age, his sermons defied the systematic organization that might have filtered out his “social gospel.” Indeed, John Calvin built his vision for the diaconate on Chrysostom’s writings, but how many Presbyterians know that? Did Stephen Colwell know it, that eminent if eccentric Presbyterian trustee of Princeton seminary who is discussed in Chapter 3, when he lambasted American Protestants in 1851 for their “creeds without charity, theology without humanity” in his *New Themes for the Protestant Clergy*? How many actually read Colwell’s book, or the translation he financed in 1857 of the French Catholic, Etienne Chastel’s *Études historique sur l’influence de la charité durant les premiers siècles chrétiens*? Colwell was no fan of John Henry Newman’s Oxford Movement, though Newman also inspired a passion for translating the early church writings into English. And indeed, texts on social welfare and reform are hard to find in Newman’s legacy of texts, the series known today as the AnteNicene Fathers (ANF) and Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF), until recently the “standard” Protestant source for patristic texts from the second to seventh centuries. French Catholics had it better. Jean-Paul Migne censored nothing from his massive *Patrologia Latina* (PL) and *Patrologia Graeca* (PG), typeset in Paris as the nineteenth century republics faced one social crisis after another. French political administrators used Migne—or at least cited his texts on social welfare—in defining new policy goals for several republics. Even as modern scholars growl over Migne’s careless typography, they owe this maverick priest an enormous debt for pushing the envelope of the patristic canon.

Growing up in the Protestant tradition, I found the ANF/NPNF long before I heard about the abbé Migne. After graduate school in nutrition and policy I was working with low income families in the inner-city, committed to social justice and, as a Christian, eager to apply faith issues to my government-funded job. But everything I knew of the early church was strained out of dusty, long-neglected library shelves. Even when I found the ANF/NPNF, my hunger to understand the religious history of social issues was unsatisfied, as I grasped at elusive traces in near-microscopic footnotes and editorial commentary.

Indeed, these texts have languished in obscure corners until recently, at least in the English-speaking world. Those who might have dragged up out of ancient cisterns these texts from the past were more often busy in doing social action itself, applying literal “rags” to more immediate and pressing concerns, eager to wash the wounds of those with present human need, to act and lobby for justice, human dignity, and rights in the modern world. Christians who care about poverty and social action tend to go into ministry, politics, or medical training, and rarely study the obscure corners of history.

And yet these early Christian writers on social issues are potentially good companions for anyone living work for relief and social justice today. They wrote narratives, sermons,

letters, hagiographical biographies and other treatises that give voice to issues relevant for social welfare in any age and religious tradition. Like the first-person voice in this book, patristic stories can sometimes intersect and elide with the stories they tell about the others in their world. Like us they too faced risk, insecurity, destructive responses, and violence, in a world that seemed to be tottering on its very foundations. Like us they too faced enormous social problems that threatened to (and often did) swallow up every resource at hand. Like us, they had biases and prejudices; they faced similar difficulties in deciding how best to use philanthropic resources. They made some choices that were heartwarming and inspiring, and others that may nauseate or chill us. As in our own world, so also early Christian concerns for social issues coexisted within a complex social and environmental network of theological disagreements, constantly changing politics, inflation, war, floods, fire, hail, and drought.

There are, of course, many differences between them and us. Our social conditioning differs from theirs, our assumptions and ideals sometimes at variance. The twenty-first century is not the second century, or the seventh. But are not our friends often very different from ourselves? Do we not value our best companions for their counterpoint, their ability to broaden the depth of our own perceptions, their power to get us “out of ourselves”? Even when we hold certain beliefs and opinions with kind but firm conviction, do we not also learn by listening to others, open to their diversity and new perspectives? Of course, simply knowing these ancient texts does not in itself equip us to use them critically and constructively in modern discourse. There is always the risk of quoting out of context with unhelpful, or even harmful results. But the challenge to sensibly apply these ancient moral writings to the problems of social welfare, hunger, disease, and injustice in our own world ever reminds us, I think, of the starting point of our own personal encounters with human need.