

Last Friday the World Economic Forum closed. Held in the ski resort of Davos, it convenes hundreds of politicians, and thousands of CEOs alongside a smattering of youth, public intellectuals and journalists. This year's theme was "Globalization 4.0," which Larry Beinhart described as focusing on 'how "legitimate frustration over the failure of globalization to consistently raise living standards spills over into populism and nationalism". To encapsulate that in one word, "inequality."<sup>1</sup>

Viewed from the top – of power, prestige, and wealth – the world is in a troubled state. You may have heard the figure from Oxfam, released at Davos “describing a global doubling of billionaires and staggering capital accumulation at the top, with just 26 of the world’s richest individuals holding wealth equal to that of the 3.8 billion poorest people on the planet combined”.<sup>2</sup>

At Davos, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres observed that among the people being left behind in the rust belts of the world, rising inequality created a sense of frustration. Oxfam International’s Executive Director Winnie Byanyima declared ‘Extreme inequality is out of control. Talking about it is not enough.’<sup>3</sup>

Such a gathering attracts sharp wit and, often, counter action. The Fight Inequality Alliance, which convenes social movements, environmental groups, women’s rights groups, trade unions and more, believes that large-scale social change comes about when people, not elites, organize.... Last week, in parallel with Davos, the alliance showcased positive actions in the poorest and most marginalized areas of thirty countries – such as a pile of rubbish or a hill where expelled migrants live above the city. “For solutions to inequality,” they advised, “adjust your gaze from Davos to the other mountains.”<sup>4</sup>

In either fora, the solutions offered to inequality were external: taxes, social policies, skills, decent jobs. And these are absolutely spot on and needed (though we may not agree on their details). Yet whereas we have in the horizon of our mind the link between peace within and peace without, between inner peace and political peace, the discussion of inequalities did not venture within, to its spiritual drivers.

Today’s gospel, does. I’d like to re-consider it imaginatively, not as a declaration of Jesus’ identity, but as the precisely cut spiritual key to dismantle inequality.

Recall the context: Arcing across history, as well as individual lives, is a spiritual story of courtship. God is love, and God’s love is so utterly determined and profound, that even if met with indifference God does not vacate earth in favour of another corner of the Universe, but keeps on reaching out.<sup>5</sup>

Today we hear the first words of Jesus in Luke’s gospel. And so, like the first words of any lover, one might expect them to be particularly considered, intentional, and generous. The lover offers an appealing gift, precious and practical, to court the beloved.

Imagine the scene – a set of small houses scattered over around 10 acres, known as the village of Nazareth. The dwellings are mostly stone or mud bricks, of one or two rooms. The synagogue is one story, simple yet cool and clean inside, where villagers gather for worship every week.

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Beinhart’s “Inequality, injustice and the elite’s annual ‘show’ in Davos” for Al Jazeera:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/inequality-injustice-elite-annual-show-davos-190124113829050.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oxfamindia.org/sites/default/files/Davos-India-Supplement.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The Cost of Inequality – Davos event moderated by Time

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ipsnews.net/2018/12/movement-fighting-inequality-growing/>

<sup>5</sup> This re-telling was inspired by a sermon by Francis Wade on this passage, according to memory.

Perhaps about as many as we are here today. José Pagola describes the service: ‘It began with a prayer...Then there was a reading...in Aramaic. Then came preaching; any adult male could take a turn.’ Jesus, one of the locals from Nazareth, stands. A beam of light juts into the room and falls upon the scroll in his hand. Dust motes dance and weave. It is quiet except for occasional animal stamps outside and baby sighs inside.

The atmosphere was almost as if one of the clerks left, got a reputation, came back as a don, and rose to preach in this chapel. Some would watch from the corner of their eyes, heads tilted in skepticism. Others might look on eagerly, with receptive curiosity.

Jesus located the words of Isaiah: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the Jubilee.

He pauses. Words and dust hang suspended in the air, baby’s coos and the shuffling of animals are muted, eyes peer from cautious corners and expectant centers. Jesus looks at the mosaic of faces with searching tenderness.

That’s it! he says inwardly. I have given them the Key. In the Spirit of God that is poured upon us we all are called, invited, allowed, empowered to love as God loves—the poor, the blind, the captive and oppressed and dispossessed. In this way we join God’s work of caring for those who need it the most. It is simple. Yet it is what life is for. This is how love works: turned outward, generously and freely on behalf of those in need.

For listeners, though, Jesus’ words end in a question mark. “That’s it?” How does that meet my need? Will it improve my crops; heal my relationship; accelerate economic growth whose pace troubled Davos?

And in that moment, hearts and minds that are turned inward on themselves fail once again to see the incredible and simple fact that life is meant to be lived outward. Mary’s Magnificat, which is sung here every day in evensong, and is the most that any woman says in the New Testament, puts it beautifully, ‘[God] has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.’<sup>6</sup> It is a message as much for students as for the elites at Davos; for the destitute and the business leader. When this cadence is seen, that God’s love seeks out all, yet gravitates towards the poor, actions that unlock inequality from all sides become natural.

The key is offered, hands are outstretched, but the offering hangs unclaimed in the still air.

Frank Wade called this “one of the great moments in history. Its greatness does not come from its setting which is ordinary nor drama, which is non-existent. It comes from the fact that this is a continual moment.” For there is not a day in our lives, in the lives of a leper or activist or a Davos billionaire, when this invitation to search out the left behind in love is not repeated. In this moment, we are given the spiritual key to dismantle inequality. There is not a day in our lives we could not nudge the balance of justice from where we are by holding this demeanor within and acting from it – perhaps call it inner justice, complementing inner peace. The offering hangs

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<sup>6</sup> As Pagola puts it, “Jesus declared emphatically that the reign of God is for the poor. He was looking at people who lived in humiliation in their villages, defenseless against the powerful children; he knew the hunger of children...peasants crying in helpless range as the tax collectors carried off the best of their crops... They must all know that God is the defender of the poor.” (111)

in the still air: we remain, with the Davos and activist diaspora, continually invited to love as God loves.

### **Nehemiah 8.1-3, 5-6, 8-10**

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen', lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'

### **Luke 4.14-21**

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'