

Week One: Unlikely Messengers

Jackie's Story



In my teens, estranged from my family, I lived in a flat for young homeless people. The heating system was inadequate, the flat was damp and in the winter sheets of ice would form on the inside of the metal framed windows. I had so little money I often skipped meals and I would walk anywhere rather than pay for public transport. I would regularly walk an 8-mile round trip to college, on an empty stomach.

Years later when my family were on in work benefits – work that we were told would lift us out of poverty, I encountered again the shame poverty brings. Imagine knowing that your kids' duvets are grotty, their pillows are stained, their cheap lino flooring is ripped, and their towels are fusty. Then you find that one of your kids has used black gaffer tape to cover a hole in the sole of their school shoe. Just imagine....

There is nothing positive in the experience of poverty and in the current climate; hopelessness among people on low incomes is endemic.

I felt helpless in the face of all this until I found my voice through the Poverty Truth Commission. As a commissioner, I was given the opportunity to meet and connect with people with similar experiences to me as well as influential public figures. We all wanted to identify and challenge the causes of poverty and create change.

Now the Poverty Truth Commission is evolving. Members who live with poverty will lead the work – going into communities to listen, learn and start conversations. Members like me will help people find their voice, like I did, and genuinely empower them to influence decision-making. After all, we are the ones who know the truth about poverty. We are the ones who can raise awareness of the damage it does to ordinary human beings. I can confidently state that it is essential that decisions and calculations about poverty be made in direct consultation with people living in poverty. Through the Poverty Truth Community, we can take small but powerful steps to resist, transform and overcome. For "Nothing About us, Without Us, Is For Us."



Jackie's story was first told by Third Forces News. You can find it in full at third-forcenews.org.uk/blogs/we-know-the-truth-about-poverty.

Reflection

In 2018, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Frameworks Institute did some research about who the most 'strategic messengers' might be to communicate a message about addressing poverty. Their research found that either Anglican Bishops or Conservative Politicians were two of the most effective spokespeople. Anglican Bishops were seen as moral leaders, the sort of people who were likely to have a positive opinion about addressing poverty already. They were believed because the message and the messenger aligned. Conservative Politicians, however, were unlikely people to be expressing this kind of attitude, and helped people to depolarise the issue and focus on solutions.

The research showed that choosing your messenger strategically can be one of the most handy tools in a campaigner's toolkit. If you want to change things, get the right people on board.

With this in mind, it's a bit surprising that the story of Jesus birth begins with God choosing a rather *unlikely* messenger. In Luke 1, an angel visits a girl called Mary. She's young, a woman and an unmarried one at that. She wouldn't be allowed to stand up at the front of the synagogue, and wouldn't be out in public alone. She isn't even at the point of leading her own household, never mind leading change in the world!

In the grand scheme of things, it doesn't seem that Mary has much power. She's a far cry from politician or Archbishop. For God to pick Mary was like choosing the person with the smallest voice to tell the busiest room to quieten down. If God wanted someone to stand up and captivate the audience in an instant, or someone who would be believed without question, God wouldn't have picked Mary.

Yet, in the opening scene of a story that would turn the world upside down, God casts Mary in the leading role. To her, God entrusts the world's most treasured message. A message of radical, social change, begun with an act which rewrites the power of society. Instead of beginning where the power of society lies, God begins good news at the heart of the places it will transform.

And the more we hear from Mary, the more we see that she understands that God's choice isn't, in fact, that unusual. In Luke 1, Mary sings:

"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant...
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

As Mary sings, she shows us that she knows a God who prefers to do things that rebalance the narrative. A God who decides that the best way to spread a message of social revolution is to begin with those who aren't usually given a voice. To invite them to hold a message the world can't afford to ignore.

When we look for God's Good News in the world today, where do we turn? How often do we dismiss the voice of those we consider to be powerless, and lose the gospel they have been offered to proclaim?

Around the country, members of local communities have come together to form Poverty Truth Commissions, like the one Jackie describes in her story. As Jackie's shares, Poverty Truth Commissions create space for those with lived experience of poverty to be the experts in leading change. They offer the chance for policy makers, community leaders and those who normally hold the power to listen.

For Jackie, this meant more than just getting a chance to speak. It gave her the vital opportunity to challenge the circumstances that had trapped her in poverty. It gave her a chance to speak truth to power, to 'resist, transform and overcome'. It gave her a chance to lift up and empower others to do the same. Because, in her words, "it is essential that decisions and calculations about poverty be made in direct consultation with people living in poverty".

Just as God places Mary at the centre of the gospel story – an unlikely messenger offered the power to change the narrative – how might we choose to look to those we would least expect to share the gospel? In doing so, how can God's message of radical change begin to become reality?

Questions for reflection

As Christians, how can we ensure that the voices of those experiencing poverty are heard?

What are the benefits of having individuals and their experiences influencing and informing policymaking?

Unlikely messengers are unexpected people who have been used to challenge and transform your way of thinking. Can you think of any examples of unlikely messengers in your life?