

20th April 2022

Poverty

“Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen [pounds], nineteen [shillings] and six [pence], result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds, ought and six, result misery.”

Charles Dickens, David Copperfield.

These lines from *David Copperfield* come from one of my favourite Dickens' characters, the wonderful Mr Micawber. For my younger readers, as well as those out-with the UK, I won't begin to explain the complications of the "pounds, shillings and pence" of Britain's pre-decimal coinage. But the simple point is this: if your expenditure exceeds your income even by the smallest amount, you're in trouble. Misery and poverty come your way.

Micawber is in a debtors' prison. Yet, despite his difficulties, he remains unflinchingly positive. At the end of the speech above, Dickens tells us: "To make his example the more impressive, Mr Micawber drank a glass of punch with an air of great enjoyment and satisfaction, and whistled the College Hornpipe." Micawber, therefore, has become synonymous with a positive attitude to life. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* describes 'A Micawber' as "One who is poor but lives in optimistic expectation of better fortune." Micawber's faith is always that "something will turn up".

I admire any Micawber who is optimistic in the face hardship. But with so *much* poverty around us and so *many* people whose outlays exceed their income by more than Micawber's "sixpence", how can we expect them to remain positive? Changes in Universal Credit; soaring fuel costs; rising inflation; National Insurance increases? When the want of "sixpence" means you can't feed your children, heat a home or pay the rent, can we dismiss poverty by suggesting people be an optimistic Micawber, as we offer reassuring platitudes that "something will turn up" – and nothing does?

We should believe we are one entity in our society. Yet we can never say we are fully "at one" when we can only imagine what poverty is like. So we have to recognise that there are many who struggle with poverty, seek to understand what that means and feel obliged to do something about it – perhaps more than ever before. What might we give up so that others benefit? A few more of *our* "sixpences"? Could our self-sacrifice be what's expected to "turn up" to alleviate the poverty and suffering of others?

A prayer for today

Generous God, may I be generous to those who are most in need? Amen

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