

Views from the Pews - The poor are always with us.

Like his contemporary, Charles Dickens, Henry Mayhew was fascinated by English society and its many strata. Unlike Dickens, Mayhew stuck to journalism, specialising in the discipline of social economics, and its cousin, statistics. He is best known for his huge work "London Labour and the London poor".

This was very influential, but Mayhew fell into the trap of adding a moral dimension to poverty, blaming the poor for their own plight. He named many failures, including laziness, drink, gambling, failure to save, big families and not enough church going.

Sound familiar?

What did Jesus say about poverty?

Not a great deal, relying mostly on actions, particularly mixing with those on the margins.

He was however blunt about our responsibility to others, requiring that when we saw a stranger facedown in a gutter we should rush forward and help them up regardless of cost.

While debating the causes of and remedies for poverty we should turn first to the Gospels, and should be careful to avoid the language of blame unless we have hard evidence.

The Salvation Army knows more than most and it is a great example of Christianity in action.

But it too relied on Mayhew's research and so we all owe him a great debt.

Richard Swarbrick