

Poverty isn't just black and white

Thought for the Day

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We all know there are some things we just can't talk about. The elephant concealing itself in this room is, of course, the election, but I'm going to have to ignore it – so there it goes, balefully looking over its shoulder as it fades into the studio panelling.

So what else to talk about on May Day? Traditionally it's the beginning of spring, but we just learned last week that this year spring has sprung particularly early, so perhaps that's too hot a topic for election week!

If the British can't talk about the climate, then what?

War and peace? – no, that's a bit too political!

Education and ignorance? – even worse!

Deprivation and social inclusion? – I must be kidding!

But to be serious, the world moves on despite our little local obsession. When we think of Darfur, or Zimbabwe, or Iraq, or any of the world's other trouble spots, we realise how much we have to be thankful for.

Poverty is relative. To be poor in Scotland bears no comparison with the third world, but that is no reason for complacency.

A report this week from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows wide variations in levels of poverty between different communities. The headlines have highlighted the disparity between ethnic minority communities and so-called "white" communities, but what it really shows is that classifying everyone under these two catch-all terms just doesn't work.

The real message from this report, like the census a few years ago, is the huge differences in attainment, wealth, education, and any other measure you care to think of, between different communities. And the so-called "white majority" is no more homogeneous than any other.

It's not skin colour that matters, but ethnicity. And that doesn't affect intelligence, or ability, but sadly, it may determine opportunity – and that is an indictment of us all.

To say the poor are always with us is no excuse. We all need to ask ourselves whether we can honestly say that we love our neighbours, whoever they are, as ourselves – that is, whether we give them the same opportunities as we take for granted for ourselves.

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