

## 15th Sunday of the Year, Year C

The First Reading of today's Mass is taken from the Book of Deuteronomy. The aim of this book is to give expression to the heart of the revelation of God received by Moses and lived out in the religion of Israel. The section we read today comes as a conclusion. The revelation of the way in which God is present in people's lives, and the corresponding revelation of the way we are to respond to God is not something obscure that needs intense research to find. It is really something very clear. It is about love. 'It is on your lips and it is in your heart. You have only to do it'.

If that is true of the revelation of the Older Testament, it is even more so of the revelation found in Jesus. In the Gospel, the student of the Jewish Scriptures recognises the central place of love, but when he asks 'Who is my neighbour?' he does not expect the beautiful, simple, demanding and open-hearted reply given him by Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The expected answer is the one contained in the Book of Sirach, an expression of Jewish 'wisdom' from about 200BC and a kind of catechism for behaviour for many Jews at the time of Jesus: 'If you do good, know to whom you do it, and you will be thanked for your good deeds. Do good to the devout, and you will be repaid - if not by them, certainly by the Most High ... Give to the devout, but do not help the sinner. Do good to the humble, but do not give to the ungodly; hold back their bread, and do not give it to them, for by means of it they might subdue you; then you will receive twice as much evil for all the good you have done to them. For the Most High also hates sinners and will inflict punishment on the ungodly. Give to the one who is good, but do not help the sinner'(Sirach 12:1-7). According to this understanding, one's neighbour is a devout and observant Jew. Jesus' behaviour regularly cut across this narrow view.

Jesus tells the story of a man who is robbed, stripped, beaten and left half dead by the side of the road. It is important to note that all we ever find out about him is that he is a 'man'. Here is our first lesson: to be a 'neighbour' it is enough to be a man, a human being, a person. We are introduced to a priest who is travelling down the same road. Because of his social position we are to assume that he is riding. He sees the man but passes by on the other side. He feels under no obligation to assist the man, because it is not at all clear that he is a neighbour towards whom he has obligations. Furthermore, it is possible that the man is dead and a priest was forbidden to pass within two metres of a corpse, under pain of being considered ritually unclean. To investigate would mean running this risk. He might have to return to Jerusalem to buy and sacrifice a heifer. We are not surprised that he avoids this risk and continues on his way. He can always claim to be taking scrupulous care to obey God. Next comes a Levite. He, too, is on his way from Jerusalem having completed his cult obligations. These included pouring oil and wine on the offerings to prepare them for sacrifice. He sees the man. If the priest did nothing, why should he? Besides there is not much that he can do- we are to assume that he is walking. However, he had oil and wine with him, he could have brought some ease and comfort to the man. Jesus is making the point that it is hypocrisy to pour oil on the sacrifices but not on a person in need.

Anyone listening to Jesus would have expected the next character to be a Jewish layman, but here the story takes an unexpected twist. He is a Samaritan. Travelling in Judean territory, he is in more danger than either the priest or the Levite. He also has more reason not to act, since it is more likely that the man by the side of the road was a Jew, and so an enemy, rather than a 'neighbour'. Let us observe carefully what he does.

The priest 'saw' the man by the roadside. The Levite 'came to the place'. The Samaritan 'came near *him*'. The personal note is not accidental. Furthermore, while all three saw the man, the Samaritan, like Jesus at Nain (Luke 7:13), was 'moved with compassion'. The key to the story lies here. Because he is moved with compassion, he does what the Levite could have and should have done, but failed to do. Without any concern as to who the man might be, 'he bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them'.

Next the Samaritan does what the priest could have and should have done, but failed to do. 'He put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him'. We are in Judah. It is a Jewish inn. One can imagine the risk the Samaritan was taking. Should the man happen to be known there, the people in the inn may have acted violently towards the Samaritan and asked questions later. At the inn the Samaritan reverses the crime of the robbers. He sees that the poor man is cared for, clothed, and financially covered.

The answer to Jesus' final question 'Which of them was a neighbour?', is unavoidable, yet it contains an understanding of 'neighbour' that goes beyond anything imagined by the lawyer. Jesus' reply is uncompromising. If we truly want the life that comes from God, we have no option but to do what the Samaritan did. There is no place for prejudice or sectarianism, and there is no place for avoiding the demands of love of neighbour by hiding behind laws which aim at regulating our relationship with God. The primary law for Christians is not in any way obscure. It is to love whoever happens to be there and to be in need. It is on our lips and it is in our heart. We simply have to 'Go, and do the same ourselves.'

This message is one with which we are very familiar - though we often find excuses for avoiding its simple demands. Like the priest and the Levite we often consciously or unconsciously go by on the other side. The linking of this Gospel with the responsorial psalm (Psalm 69 in the Bible) invites us to look at the parable from the side of the man who fell into the hands of brigands'. It invites us to get in touch with the pain that is in our lives and our hurts and disappointments. There are times when those to whom we looked walk by and fail to hear our cry for help. We can often feel wounded and abandoned and without help. If that is part of your experience, I would recommend that you take time today to pray with Psalm 69. In verses not quoted in today's Mass, the psalmist expresses feelings with which we are all familiar: 'Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God'(69:1-3). 'Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none'(69:20).

The psalm goes on to say why he is feeling the way he is. He realises that he is not innocent, but he claims that he is being falsely accused (69:4-5). We all know how hurtful it can be when others misunderstand us and misjudge our motives. The psalmist feels abandoned even by his family and friends: 'I have become a stranger to my kindred, an alien to my mother's children'(69:8). 'I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none'(69:20).

When this happens to us, what are we to do? The psalmist tells us to continue to cry out to God, trusting that God will be faithful to us and continue to love us. He will send us the Good Samaritan that we need at a time that he knows best. Whatever else we must not despair:

'But as for me, my prayer is to you, O Lord. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me. With your faithful help; rescue me from sinking in the mire; let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters. Do not let the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the Pit close its mouth over me. Answer me, O Lord, for your steadfast love is good; according to your abundant mercy, turn to me. Do not hide your face from your servant, for I am in distress – make haste to answer me. Draw near to me, redeem me, set me free because of my enemies' (69:13-18).

It is this theme that is expressed in the verses chosen for today's Mass. God loves us the way Jesus loves us. Like the Good Samaritan, Jesus never walks by. He will always hear our cry. Whatever our situation, let us look for the grace and listen for the word spoken in our hearts by the Spirit of Jesus. Saint Augustine sees the Church as the inn to which Jesus has brought us so that our wounds can be healed. We are here, hurting but constantly cared for. Let us trust in his love, and trust also that, though wounded ourselves, we can always stop and help our brother or sister, our hurting neighbour. This is the essence of following Jesus.