

26th Sunday of the Year, Year C

The most striking element in the Gospel we have just read is the fact that the rich man did not oppress Lazarus in any positive way. He did not directly take anything from him or set out to make his life miserable. His fault - and it is judged by Jesus to be a most serious one - is that he paid no attention to him. He simply treated him as though he did not exist and went ahead merrily living in self-indulgent luxury.

When it was too late, he cried out to Abraham who reminded him that he had no excuse for his behaviour. The essential trait of God as revealed in the Scriptures is that he is a God who hears the cry of the poor, and the key commandment of the whole of the Biblical tradition is to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength - which means being committed positively to work for the carrying out of God's will in the world. In other words we are to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. The first reading of today's mass, from the prophet Amos, is one of hundreds of texts that emphasise this point. The rich man in Jesus' parable was so caught up with his own self-indulgence that he failed to hear the cry of the poor man at his gate - a sure indication that he lacked any true relationship with God.

There are some religious movements that envisage God in an abstract way as the impersonal source of all being. They encourage their followers to withdraw from the world, and they see perfection as being an experience of the stillness and peace of being absorbed in communion with this source untouched by the distractions and sufferings of ordinary life. The Christian understanding, building upon the Jewish, is very different. Our God is a personal God - the source of all life, but a God who is passionately concerned for creation and is constantly pouring out grace to heal, to liberate and to love us in the real circumstances of our complex lives.

Communion with God is, indeed, an invitation into intimacy with God. God loves all his sons and daughters. Through our baptism we have been privileged to share in that special communion of love which Jesus experienced. We are called to share in Jesus' love for the one he called 'Father' and to share also in the Father's delight in his Beloved Son. At our baptism God said to each of us: 'You are my daughter/son, the one I love. In you I delight'. And God will never go back on this promise, constantly embracing us in love through the Spirit of love which he keeps on pouring into our hearts.

You cannot love a person without being caught up in that person's dreams and hopes and longings. Since our communion with God is a personal one, we are necessarily caught up in the longing of the heart of God to heal and liberate the world from sin and from all its terrible consequences. Far from withdrawing us from the world into the pseudo-peace of non-involvement, our response to grace impels us to do what Jesus did and to give our lives to open others to God's grace.

A question arises: If God is the all-powerful creator, why does he not simply intervene in the world and fix up all our problems? This would be to imagine God as a puppeteer managing all the strings and taking no notice of the mysterious gift of freedom which is the glory of being human but also the cause of many of the tragedies that engulf us. We must keep reminding ourselves that God is love, and that love does not control. That does not mean that God is sitting back, as it were, letting the world run its independent course. God is love and is intimately

involved at every moment in the happenings of our world. But God does not crash in and take over. God respects the freedom he has given us. Whatever situation we take, we can be certain that God is present there inspiring, forgiving, inviting, pouring out the Spirit of his love to get us to change and to be instruments of love building a civilisation of love rather than destructive hatred or the kind of self-indulgence revealed in today's parable.

We are asked to pray - not to change God's mind or action, but to direct our hearts towards God so that we may be receptive to his transforming, healing grace and that we may follow his inspiration and be instruments of the wonderful, miraculous power of God's love. When we pray for others we draw them into our hearts in the hope that our prayer may open them too to the grace which God is surely pouring down upon them. When we act out of love, we know that we cannot force others to act in the way we would want. Our faith reminds us that God, too, respects human freedom while supporting every good that rises in our hearts and gracing us to back away from all the evil.

The central point of today's readings is that if our communion with God is genuine, and not a form of spiritual escape, we will be genuinely concerned to be instruments of God's grace in the real, hurting world of which we are part. As a way of focusing on this truth, I invite you to put some time aside today to pray through Psalm 146 - the psalm chosen for today's response. It takes us through ten qualities of God's love and provides an excellent examination for us, to check the reality of our relationship with God and to inspire us to a more active co-operation with grace.

We are told that God keeps faith for ever. This means that God will keep all the promises he has ever made to you and to your children and to the world. We will never be without God's love, no matter how dark the road may seem. Can we believe this when things are going hard for us? Sometimes we have found ourselves unable to keep promises we have made - and sometimes it is because the promises turned out to be unwisely made. Sometimes circumstances that are too complex to unravel have simply brought us to exhaustion and we have had to let promises go. Could we look today at the central promises that are still functioning in our lives? Relying on God's grace could we ask to be more open to the Spirit which God is certainly offering us to find more effective ways of keeping the promises which we made in baptism and confirmation to carry on Jesus' mission of love in this world. It is unlikely that we have the means to live as sumptuously as the man in the Gospel, but it is, as we know, all too easy to be so caught up in the routine of our own interests that we can be just as indifferent to those crying out for help at our very gates.

The psalm goes on to remind us that God is just to those who are oppressed. If we believe this, then a lot of people must not be listening or responding to grace or the world would not be such an unjust place. Is God asking me or you to reach out in one or other area of oppression and do what we can, always respecting persons and in love, to put injustices right? Little help is gained by being overwhelmed by a huge list. God is the one who is just to the oppressed, so the real question is: Is God inspiring me, or us as a community, to do something in a specific area. If so am I willing to listen and to begin responding?

God, we are told, gives bread to the hungry. Real bread, of course, to fill an empty stomach, but also all that is needed to satisfy our other hungers and longings. Is this not the meaning of the

Eucharist? Can we love God without sharing his longing to reach out to meet people's hunger - for bread, for love, for a listening ear, for understanding, for dignity, for a place and a home?

God sets prisoners free. If so many people are locked into racism and prejudice and destructive addictions, and inability to forgive, it is not because grace is lacking. It must be because so many are insensitive to grace and failing to respond to the inspiration of God's loving Spirit to go out and help unlock the prisons that we create in our fear. God is not asking any person or any group to solve all these problems - we do not have enough keys. But God is surely asking us to make a contribution. Are we listening? Can we help each other face these painful situations with the power of God's love?

There are a further 6 examples given in the psalm. One or other of them may touch my heart or yours today. Let us not become so overwhelmed with the enormity of the task that we become crippled by a false guilt or just exhausted before we even start. The key is found in loving God and trusting in God's Spirit. If God wants us to be part of his mission - and God surely does - he will reveal to us the way we are to be an instrument of his grace. Today's gospel is a powerful reminder that we are to listen to God, and then, trusting in his guidance and the power of his love, take a small step in response to his inspiration. A thousand such small steps, joined with millions of other such small steps, could transform the face of the earth and then Jesus' vision would be realised - a vision expressed in his own prayer: 'Father, may your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'.