The Good Samaritan saw, felt compassion and acted

On the road to Jerusalem Jesus taught the way of discipleship. The spiritual life has been compared to a tripod supported on the legs of prayer, study of our religion and practical action. Today’s Gospel, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 15: 10-37), is about love in action.

On the Sundays in Ordinary Time, the First Reading is chosen for its connection with the Gospel, and it sometimes alerts one to something in the gospel that might otherwise be overlooked. Today’s passage from Deuteronomy reminds us that the great commandment of loving God with all our heart and mind is “not beyond your strength or beyond your reach.” As Saint John put it, how can we say that we love God whom we have never seen if we do not love the people that we do see. Charity begins at home.

Love is a word that is very often used but is seldom understood. The purpose of religious laws is to guide us towards total love of God and love of people. The parable of the Good Samaritan brings out the practical nature of authentic charity. There are three steps in his response to the plight of the man dumped in the ditch. He saw with his eyes: his heart opened up in compassion: and he acted with his hands.

The first step in love is to be attentive to people

The first step in love is to see people, to be aware of them and attentive. Our eyes open the shutters of our aloofness when we take notice of people. Being attentive we hear them knocking on our doors, seeking entry into our lives. But so often we are experts at ignoring people and keeping them out. Certain people are barred because of prejudice or discrimination. Or we shrink from the demands on our time so we are too busy to attend to their knock. We might even shelter behind a rule.

The second step is compassion

The second step is to answer the knock and let the person in. The Good Samaritan was moved with compassion for the injured traveller. Compassion is resident in the heart, the home of feeling. Compassion literally means feeling-with, responding to the pain of the other person. When others knock at the door, compassion lets them in and is willing to reach out to them, whether it is in sharing tears in their sorrow, or celebrating with their joy or giving to their emptiness.

Deep attentiveness to others will enable us to be sensitive not only to what they say, but more importantly, to what they need to say but are unable. This is typical of victims of abuse. Just as Jesus not only heard the question, “Who is my neighbour?” but he was also sensitive to the restricted mind behind the question. So, instead of a straightforward answer to the question, he told a story which gently invited the man to find the answer in himself.

The third step is practical action

The third step in charity is to translate feeling into practical action. The man who asked the question was an expert in Jewish law. Jesus dropped a bombshell in choosing a Samaritan, a despised, half-pagan outsider, as the one who fulfilled God’s law of love more than the priest and Levite, the churchy people of that time. In their defence one might suggest that they had a good excuse because any contact with blood would have barred them from working in the temple until they completed a
purification. It is amazing how many excuses we can find to avoid helping somebody in need. But really, there is no excuse to justify failing to assist somebody in a case of life or death. The two churchy men were guided by harsh legalism to pass by on the other side.

But when the Samaritan came to the scene, he was moved with compassion at what he saw. His hands sprang into practical action. He bandaged the wounds, pouring oil and wine on them, lifted the poor victim on to his own mount, carried him to an inn, put his hand into his pocket to pay for the wounded victim’s keep, and promised to come back to pay any extra expense. Now, Mr. Questioner, which of the three proved himself to be a neighbour?

Going back to the First Reading, God’s Law is not beyond your strength or beyond your reach … not up there in heaven or beyond the seas, but the Word is very near to you.

Pope Francis described the nightmare scene in his fear of a Church “remaining shut up within structures which give a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door are people who are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: ‘Give them something to eat’.” It was the churchy people who passed by on the other side. Later, it was they who plotted the death of Jesus. Some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good!

In contrast to his nightmare, Pope Francis wrote: “When we live out in a spirituality of drawing nearer to others and seeking their welfare, our hearts are opened wide to the Lord’s greatest and most beautiful gifts. Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God. Whenever our eyes are opened to acknowledge the other, we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God. If we want to advance in the spiritual life, we must constantly be missionaries.” (The Joy of the Gospel, 272).

As Saint Augustine said, there are many in the Church who are not in the Kingdom, and many in the Kingdom who are not in the Church.”

Prayer

O God of love and compassion, open our eyes to make us aware of others and their needs. Enkindle our hearts so that we are moved with warm compassion towards all who need us. Bless our hands that they will bring help to those in need.