

Homily for 30th Sunday of Ordinary Time



Great answers from Year 4 at school about, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ The person sitting next to me, the person across the room. The people living next door. The people in our block (of flats). Bit by bit expanding their thoughts on who their neighbour is. Plus the fact that of all the countries they came up with in Africa, one was Madagascar, which, whether they were thinking of the film or not, was pretty impressive. How far are we ready to expand our idea of who is my neighbour, not just theoretically but lived in our lives?

The children also new all the details of ‘The Good Samaritan,’ which is the parable Luke uses to complete this passage of Matthew’s in today’s gospel. They knew he was an outcast and an enemy (in their words) of the Jews. Their knowledge was impressive. It is also this parable that Pope Francis examines in his latest letter ‘Fratelli tutti...’ which I was talking about last week. In 1977 the Beegees were asking, ‘How deep is your love,’ Jesus and Pope Francis are asking ‘how broad is your love?’

One of the points that the Bible starts from is, ‘Do you remember when you needed love?’ Will you forget this when dealing with others who need yours? The first reading reminds the Israelites how they were refugees once, running from Pharaoh, King of Egypt, and how they were helped. So the Book of Exodus tells them how to treat others now. You were strangers once it says. So now you must not molest the stranger or oppress them. If you are harsh says God, I will truly hear their cry.’ Sometimes it is good for us to remember our backgrounds. For many of us who are Catholics in England, though not all, our families came as economic migrants. There were signs up on doors telling our ancestors they were less welcome than dogs. Many Catholic communities (and others) have gone through (or are going through) the same experience, and it should inform how we act about others arriving here. And when Pope Francis reflects on the two religious people walking past the man left for dead in the parable, he says: ‘What is more, caught up as we are with our own needs, the sight of a person who is suffering disturbs us. It makes us uneasy that we live as if we have no time to waste on other people’s problems. These are symptoms of an unhealthy society. A society

that seeks prosperity but turns its back on suffering.’ The Pope says the parable breaks the characters down into two types, those who care, touch and heal, and those who look away, who walk past. (He also notes that clearly Jesus does not think belief in God is enough, hence the two religious characters who walk past. Faith, love of neighbour, has to be lived out.)

We know that we only manage part of this. It is hard to live it, but openness to it is a great step. First the Pope asks us to be powerfully aware of the unity and common home of all peoples that is our world, as I said last week.

But he goes on to say, ‘No one can mature or find fulfilment by withdrawing from others. By its very nature, love calls for a growth in openness and the ability to accept others. No one can be excluded because of their place of birth or other reasons.’

I think we can say that we live in a time, coronavirus time, when physically we are more often than not being asked to close ourselves off to others. This can bring about a mental as well as physical closing off to everyone and a temptation to worry only about ourselves. A desire to look after No.1 or just immediate family. ‘Coronavirus time’ is a time we want to escape from, and not unreasonably. Our question is, ‘Will there be a vaccine next year?’ ‘When will it end?’ The Pope is asking us to keep a broader mind. That for our own benefit, an openness to the needs of others actually lifts us into a wider, more positive, world, and that desire to love in the sense Jesus means, can only bring us healing. But it is also a time that asks us to go deeper into the mystery of what it is to love others who we do not know or perhaps even like. There is only one mystery of which all this is a part, the love of God, and this time asks us to live that love and to trust in God, which does not mean that nothing bad will happen to us, possibly the reverse, but how we approach it.

The Pope reminds us that this is our challenge and responsibility. In rather telling words he says: ‘Each day offers a new opportunity. We should not expect everything from those who govern us; that would be childish. We need to take an active part and start with our own lives.’

Year 4 were willing to expand their own idea of ‘who my neighbour is.’ As adults, most of us, we need to take their example even further and live as the Pope says with, ‘A heart open to the whole world.’