

Homily for 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Pope is a political realist, he has said about politicians that ‘they can spread fear and disillusion for their own purposes and to enable them or their party or group to take control,’ after all he has lived through dictatorships and civil unrest in Argentina and knows the harshest things politicians and others in power can get up to.

But he is also always hopeful. Hopeful about humanity. In his letter Fratelli Tutti, he talks about ‘Political Love or Charity’ which is possibly not what we have been watching on our TVs this week. What he says about a politician’s duty is : “It is an equally indispensable act of love to organise and structure society so that one’s neighbour will never find himself in poverty.

“To be a politician and to have this ideal is to a person who builds bridges rather than causes divisions to be created.” (Again not a lot of that being seen just now.)

All this is based on his reflections on the life of St. Francis and the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we have just heard.

In building bridges you may remember the story of St. Francis going off in the middle of the Crusades to meet the Muslim leader, Sultan Malik-el-Kabil in Egypt. Off he goes risking the dangerous journey of the time and having no idea how he would be received when he arrived in Egypt. In fact they admired his courage and holiness and he returned unharmed. But he did this in the face of all the politicians of his age, all the Christian leaders who, on the whole, had no desire to achieve peace.

St. Francis does not come to this decision out of the blue. It is part of his whole approach to the world around him. We all know of his love for creation, and the famous Canticle that became the opening line for Laudato Si, where he sings of his love for all creation and his seeing the sun and moon and the created world as his brothers and sisters. Because he could love creation in general like that, with no boundaries, in fact beyond the boundaries most people would have seen as reasonable, his love for all humanity was again without borders or restrictions. As the Pope said: “St. Francis acknowledged, loved, appreciated each person.” “He loved Creation, sowed seeds of peace and walked alongside the poor, the abandoned, the infirm and the outcast, those considered the least of his brothers and sisters.”

So it is obvious how this applies to and comes from Jesus’ use of his parable about the beaten Jew and the generous Samaritan. We all know the Jews’ attitudes to Samaritans at the time, how Jesus was considered well out of order when he asked a Samaritan woman at a well for a cup of water.

So here in this story when Jesus is being asked about who we should love, who is our neighbour, Jesus deliberately uses the group of people that

the Jews actually considered it was right, in fact a religious duty, to have nothing to do with. Remember what the Pope said about borders and boundaries.

Under the title of the Chapter, “A heart open to the whole world,” Jesus (and now the Pope) ask us to listen or read this parable and then ask ourselves, with real honesty, who do we relate to, who have we been most like, of the characters in the story? Who do we identify with?

He goes through the various characters starting with the injured man. Obviously, he points out, we have lots of the injured (physically or mentally or both) on our streets, the people of all ages who fail to find their place in society. He reminds us of our ability to step over them literally, or past them. But he also accepts that we can very easily find ourselves in that situation. When I was working with people on the streets of London, it was amazing at first to me how many said they never thought they would end up there, but a marriage had gone wrong, or a job, or they couldn't manage after the army had given them a routine all their lives (they always had clean shoes), or they had had mental health problems or a mix of these. From a good home and job, they were living in the bushes in a park.

There are, as well, the Pope says, the ‘hidden exiles,’ those in our society who are never seen. They may have accommodation but with their problems, perhaps loneliness, a disability, or some of those I have already mentioned, they are never seen. They don't feel they want to be seen perhaps or have lost the ability or courage to make themselves seen.

He talks about this after discussing the very visible exiles that turn up on our borders. Perhaps taking a title from the charity ‘Medecins sans Frontiers’ (Medics without borders), he talks about ‘neighbours without borders.’ The apparent absence of human dignity on borders where people are not cared for.

As we see our politicians reflecting on who and what are right to lead the country over the next months and years, the parable of the Good Samaritan is a good place to start on our own reflections on what we expect from a government, as responsible citizens, and as citizens with a clear moral compass.

Firstly about where we stand. Getting our own thoughts and attitudes in alignment with the stand the Good Samaritan takes. Caring for and paying for a man he does not know from Adam.

Then ask whether we can expect our politicians to know what ‘political love’ might be. If we then say, ‘well we would never expect them to live up to that,’ ask ourselves why they would not. Surely rather than being pessimistic we can hope, like the Pope does. After all they are our neighbours too.