

Homily for The Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C) (11/07/10)

This gospel story is so familiar, it is hard to know what there might be still to say about the Good Samaritan. But we have to start at the beginning, we have to start with the context. A lawyer wants to disconcert Jesus, wants to catch him off guard, to make him say something that will later on be difficult to defend or explain. So the lawyer asks a question, and if we are going to understand what Jesus says, we have to look at that question. We will only really understand Jesus' answer if we know what the question was. The lawyer asks: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus actually gets the man to answer his own question, and the parable comes as the answer to a supplementary question, but fundamentally this is a conversation about eternal life. The lawyer thinks he is managing to trick Jesus here, to catch him out, but in fact of course he is actually asking the very person best able to answer, and so he gets much more than he bargained for.

This is a conversation, then, about how to gain eternal life. Eternal life, of course, is simply the fulfillment, the completion, of earthly living: the more true, good and beautiful our ordinary life is, the more it gets us ready for eternity. So this is not just a question about the future, it is a question about the present. What is it like to really live? Real living, life to the full, is life which balances loving God and loving other people, and the parable is meant to help us work out what loving other people might really mean. What difference does it make to my ordinary life?

So, this parable is a story about being really alive. At the centre of it is a man who is 'half dead'. For the victim of the robbery, life is slipping away. The story features one man half dead, and three men alive. Or does it? Two men pass the victim by. We know who they were, but we don't know why they pass him by. It is possible that they were cold-hearted and cruel, but it is also possible that they were just frightened, or weak, or unsure what to do. We like to say they were cruel and full of their own importance, because then we can distance them from us, they are so bad that they are not like us at all. In fact, probably they were pretty ordinary people who came up with very convincing reasons for passing the man by, the sort of reasons any of us might come up with. Somehow they are not touched by this injured man. His simple human need does not move them; one could ask, if they are unmoved by this man's suffering, are they actually so very alive after all? If their hearts are undisturbed, are they living life to the full, life as God meant it, life as God dreams it? Perhaps, on looking closer, this is a story about just one man fully alive, and three who, in their different ways, are half dead.

What makes the Samaritan different, leaving aside for now the fact that his nationality made him someone who Jews would have looked down on, even despised as being only half a believer, is that he is moved with compassion. This reaction of the Samaritan traveler is rather difficult to put into words. We tend to think of compassion as something like feeling sorry for someone, feeling pity for

them, but it is much stronger than that. The word that the scriptures use, which is also used about Jesus' reaction, for example, when he sees the crowds looking lost, like sheep without a shepherd (Mt 9.36) is much stronger than that. It describes a reaction that is almost physical in its intensity. The sight of this man stops the Samaritan dead in his tracks and leaves him winded, gasping for breath, his stomach churning. Seeing the man's physical and mental suffering, the Samaritan suffers too. He is genuinely affected by what he sees. He has compassion – he suffers with this man. As The Pope puts it in one of his commentaries on this passage, the Samaritan's heart is 'wrenched open' (Jesus of Nazareth p.197).

So, this is a story about eternal life, and therefore it is a story about real, authentic human living. To be alive, it seems, to be truly alive, one have a heart that is vulnerable, a heart that can be wrenched open. This is more than a little frightening. This is not really what we want. Our reaction to suffering has tended to move in quite the opposite direction. In a world of instant global news there is just so much suffering, so much lack, that we can see, that we are paralysed into inactivity, and we become almost immune to it. But one of the most powerful symbols of our Catholic faith remains the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This is a heart that was wounded by the soldiers spear, but after 2,000 years the wound remains open, it has still not healed, and it will remain so until the world comes to an end. The wounded heart of Jesus is our constant reminder that real life, true human living, requires that we have hearts made not of invulnerable stone, but of all-too fragile flesh (Ezekiel 36.26). It is this which should form the essence of Catholic attempts to address social issues, social problems. Of course, just like everyone else who works in aid and development, Catholics need to be competent, efficient, effective; but for us this is not enough. Where others, quite understandably, want to defend themselves from being overcome by what they see, the unique Catholic contribution is to rest in the heart of Christ, which allows us to take the risk of compassion. Pope Benedict, once again, the great Apostle of love, talks about this:

"The Christian's programme —the programme of the Good Samaritan, the programme of Jesus—is "a heart which sees". This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly" Deus Caritas Est n31.

The programme of the Good Samaritan, of the only man in the parable who is truly alive, is based upon a heart that sees. What that asks of us is that we, like the saints who have gone before us, develop hearts that see. This comes from reading and understanding the scriptures, because there we see how Jesus, the ultimate heart that sees, reacts to peoples needs. The lives of the saints give us a similar insight into hearts that see. Living deeply in the heart of the Church enables us to be part of a people struggling to have hearts that see, so that together we lead each other on. Within the Church we experience the love of God, and the love of those around us, and it is this knowledge that we are loved that gives us the strength and the courage to have hearts that are vulnerable, hearts that dare to be open. Lord, give us hearts that see.