

15th. Sunday in Ordinary Time

I can understand why some people choose to read the Advertiser beginning from the back page and work their way towards the front. I look forward to the sport and the weather on the television news more than what comes before it. It is usually much less confronting to read the sports pages than it is to read the reports of crimes and disasters from around the world. Unless it we were reading about last Saturday's showdown. That could be described as a crime or a disaster.

We read about a crime in today's gospel. But what happened to the traveller on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho is not the most disturbing part of the gospel story. We may be disturbed first of all by the question of the lawyer. We are told that he set out to test Jesus. His question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" was not one that came from his heart.

Jesus threw the question back to him. "What is written in the Law? What do you read there?" For the faithful Jew the law that God gave to Moses had been lovingly handed on so that people may know what God wanted of them. Practicing the law was a source of life and salvation. Today's reading from the Book of Deuteronomy is a beautiful expression of how the law puts our hearts in tune with the heart of God. "Obey the voice of the Lord your God, keeping those

commandments and laws of his that are written in the Book of the Law, and you shall return to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul." Moses then went on to explain that what God calls us to do is not something foreign to our being, but an expression of the purpose for which we were made. "The Word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for your observance."

You and I were made in the image of God. Our God is a God of love. Selfishness is an aberration. We are not being true to ourselves when we hurt other people.

The Lawyer in the gospel knew what was at the heart of it. "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself." He was reflecting the wisdom of the holy ones of Israel when he put together into one commandment love of God and love of neighbour. Jesus commended him on his answer. That should have been the end of the story.

But like so many of us who know what is right he kept looking for a way out. "But who is my neighbour?" Jesus was very gentle with him in the way that he answers that question. He offers him an example of what it means to be neighbour. People were familiar with how dangerous that desert road down to Jericho was and how active the highway robbers were. Perhaps we can be too

quick in condemning the priest and the Levite in our story for passing the injured man on the other side of the road. It is the sort of thing that you or I may well have done. If the man on the ground had already died touching him would have prevented those men from carrying out their priestly duties. If they had stopped to help, they may have been attacked themselves.

But the Samaritan who came along had the freedom to overcome his fears about robbers and had nothing to lose by way of ritual cleanness. He was already an outsider who was thought to be ignorant of the Law. But he was the one who put the Law into practice. He risked becoming a victim of violence himself by stopping, giving first aid to the man who was half dead on the side of the road and then putting him on his own donkey to take him to a place where he could recover from his injuries. He was true to himself, to the way that God had made him, by reaching out with compassion to this injured stranger.

The question that the lawyer asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbour?” was turned right around by Jesus when he asked, “Which of these proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the brigand’s hands?”. Jesus wanted this man, and all of us to understand that we do not choose who our neighbours are. Those who are in any kind of need choose us to be their neighbours. When

we notice the need of others, we begin to understand the call to reach out in love for them. Jesus then invited the Lawyer to put this understanding into action. When Jesus heard him say, “The one who took pity on him,” Jesus simply said, “Go, and do the same yourself.”

Are we able to hear Jesus say that to us? I know that there are many times that I would like to cross the road and not look to see if I am called upon to be of help to someone in need. There are many situations of injustice in our world that I do not even want to read about in the paper, let alone ask if there is something that I can do to make a difference to them.

On the front of our bulletin today we have a little of what Pope Francis said at a Mass to commemorate the sixth anniversary of his visit to the island of Lampedusa. It is the place where many African refugees make their first landfall in Europe. He spoke powerfully then about the globalisation of indifference that prevents us from both accepting refugees and changing the situations of injustice that forces families to flee from their homes. Pope Francis not only talks about the Law of love but he tries to find every possible way to be a neighbour to migrants that he calls “a symbol of all those rejected by today’s globalised society”. It will only be with God’s grace and with great courage that we will go and do the same.