

15th. Sunday in Ordinary Time

I often pray a little prayer asking Jesus to give me the right words to say when I am about to meet people. Jesus is a great teacher who brings people to understand things by the way that he answers the questions that are put to him. Today we have two wonderful examples of that.

When the lawyer came to him with the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” 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 refuse to respond to the needs of others.

The Lawyer in the gospel knew what was at the heart of the Law of Moses. “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?” Again Jesus answers that question in the way that only great teachers can. He told him a story. The lawyer knew how dangerous that desert road down from Jerusalem to Jericho was and how active the highway robbers were. Jesus tells of three people making their way along that road. 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.

As we reflect upon our Gospel today, we can pray that we may learn what Jesus our teacher wants us to learn. And then it will only be with God’s grace and with great courage that we will put that teaching into practice and that we will go and do the same.