

Fifteenth Sunday of the Year: July 10, 2016

Deuteronomy 30:10-14; Colossians 1:15-20; Luke 10:25-37

We are living in a world which is growing daily further and further away from God. People aim to get the maximum for themselves and ignore or forget their purpose of life. The sacred scriptures constantly remind us of the loving unbroken care of God towards human persons. He created everything for man and for his well-being. His concern for human persons is incomparable. He sent his messengers constantly to look after his people. He is given to us as our Father, care taker and protector. The image of God as the shepherd of his people has a long tradition in the history of God's people. Today's gospel reminds us that we are the instruments of God and we ought to help those in need even though they are unlike us and even if we dislike them. We also must recognise that we are in constant need of the help of others, particularly of God. Jesus' choice of the Samaritan as the hero of his story may have made his audience wince. Even the Lawyer in the story does not use his name in his response but he only says the one who showed mercy. Jesus teaches us through the parable of the Good Samaritan that God's grace comes to us in all forms and through all kinds of people. In the first reading Moses speaks about the law of God which guides people along the path of life. Paul in the second reading tells us of the involvement of Christ in creation and how he works for the salvation of the world.

The first reading taken from the Book of Deuteronomy is one of the most consoling and joyful words given to people. It was time for Moses to take leave of his people as he could not reach the Promised Land. It simply says that God is our life and that our lives can reveal God. It recounts an important moment in our understanding of humanity and God. Through their special bond with God, the people have committed themselves to observing all that God commands them. The law is God's gift to them, making clear just what is expected of them as chosen people. They are called upon to have total loyalty to the covenant. They have to be loyal to God as he was to them. Moses also reminds them of the preciousness of the law. The law is entirely compatible with who they are as God's holy people. The law is given for their benefit and they have to appreciate its value and not in any way dishonour the law. The Law is entirely compatible with who they are as God's holy people. There is nothing mysterious and remote about it. But precisely because the Law is so prepared for their benefit, there is a risk that they may not appreciate its value. It something they ought to treasure in their heart. All are inclined to see it but it is something that resonates in the heart of the person.

The second reading selected from Letter of Paul to the Colossians is one of the most significant texts in the whole New Testament. It tells us about the divinity of Jesus and that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. All creation was in him, through him and for him. Paul had already praised the Colossians for the strength of their faith and he tells them that he always prays for them. Christ through his incarnation has made God visible to man. Man's sonship with God indeed existed even before creation began. Since all is created in and through him, Christ is the center of unity. Paul convinces them that all created things have a purpose and fulfillment in Christ. Christ is the active and final cause of all of them. In his divinity he was there before all else and in his humanity he is first in the rank of importance. As creator he continues to sustain all creation and keeps it in existence. In his life on earth Christ brought God's saving love to bear on the fallen human race. He shed his blood in order to reconcile everything to God. His preeminence shines forth in his being the head of the Church and firstborn from the dead. He is the sole intermediary between God and the creatures. By his obedience, Jesus has reconciled all humanity to God.

The Gospel of today presents us a beautiful story of the Good Samaritan, the man who goes out of his way to help a person in need. The purpose of this parable is to teach the disciples and the community the meaning of neighbourliness. The setting revolves around a lawyer attempting to test Jesus in a verbal battle regarding his teaching on inheriting eternal life. Jesus counters him with his knowledge of the law regarding salvation and discovers that the man is well versed in his knowledge of scriptures. He tells him that it contains in his love of God and Neighbour. With this he is eligible to have eternal life. Jesus gives him the story, the parable that explains the concept of neighbor in our real life. For the Jews the concept of a neighbor did not go beyond a fellow Jew. The basic teaching Luke draws from the parable is that any time a person is found in need is sacred time and any place a person is found in need is a sacred place and, regardless of who the person is a Christian must reach out and help. The Samaritan is presented as a model to be followed by every person and therefore the traditional understanding that he is a Good Samaritan. In other words Luke makes this parable an example story to be followed by every Christian.

Thus, to obtain eternal life, one must know God, who is the Truth! But this knowledge of God is a knowledge of love: to know the Truth that is God, is to know God, who "is Love" (1 Jn. 4:16). Thus, it is not necessary to be a great scholar to know God! Of course, there are some very well educated, and even erudite, people who know God. But this is not a necessity. Just before answering the lawyer's question, Jesus had clearly said: "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven

and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to the little ones... No one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (Luke. 10:21-22) The knowledge of God has been reserved for the little ones. This is not a question of the size of one's body, but rather of one's spirit. But this is done by allowing oneself to be led by the attractions of the body and of the world in which one lives. The little ones are they who obey the Law and the commandments of God. They lovingly observe the precepts of the Lord: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with your entire mind (Deut. 6:5); and your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18).

This Gospel passage presents us with the way of life for a Christian and how he ought to behave in his search for eternal life. It is one of the most famous stories told by Jesus elaborating his teaching. There are four persons in this story. There is a priest, who is naturally a Jew and, besides, a man of deep religious convictions. There is a Levite, also a Jew, and also a religious person and a member of the priestly community. There is a Samaritan, whom we only know as some kind of a merchant. We know nothing about his religious convictions but it seems that his religious faith is irrelevant to the story. Finally, there is a fourth person lying severely injured on the road side. The identity of the person and his profession is uncertain. We can safely presuppose that he was a Jew, who perhaps was a merchant or a traveler attacked by the robbers and now is in serious physical trouble. But he could have been a Samaritan, or another priest, or another Levite, or someone else altogether. The details are not relevant here. The only thing that matters is that here is a human person who is deeply in need of help. In such a situation, the story indicates how response may be made by an individual. The person who goes to help the other forgets everything else and goes beyond self to serve the one in need. This tells us that our faith is meant to bind us closer to all persons irrespective of their origin or religion. If it does not unite us then it cannot be true or good faith.

Jesus tells his audience to forget about the religious obligations at the moment. The priest and the Levite on the way to the Temple in Jerusalem and could not risk coming in physical contact with the injured man if, as was most likely, he was bleeding. Contact with blood would have rendered them "unclean" and prevented them from carrying out their Temple obligations. Jesus tells them to forget about the moral condition of the person to be helped, namely how the injured man got into this situation. He may have been quite stupid to be travelling alone along a road that was notorious for robberies and hijackings. He might even have been a

highwayman who had been pretending to have been beaten up by those to rob others. For Jesus, in telling this story, none of these considerations mattered. What did matter was that this injured man now had a higher priority than the concerns of the other three. But only one of the three responded to the injured man's immediate and urgent need. The Samaritan was the one who broke his journey to apply first aid, and showed all the human concern for him and finally brought him to the inn where he even paid the expenses.

It is good for us to understand the relationship between the Jews and Samaritans who did not get along well at all. Even though they had common ancestry and shared scriptures, their animosity would not be reduced. They had strong reasons too, namely racial, political and religious. Racially the Samaritans were Semites and politically often the Samaritans had collaborated with the enemies of Judah. Religiously Samaritans did not accept all the scriptures and did not accept Jerusalem but had their Temple on Mount Garizim. Generally the Samaritans refused any hospitality to a Jew passing through Samaria. History also tells us that five centuries after Christ Samaritans and Christians also fought and later the relationship between Christians and Jews was far from being a happy one. In this context we have the Parable of Good Samaritan. However we have Luke's purpose of telling this parable to understand the meaning of helping those in need. Jesus also explained to the lawyer the necessary principle, namely love your neighbor as you love yourself. The universal behavior of people is plainly visible and it continues to exist as it did in the time of Jesus, namely the divide on the basis of religion, culture and language. The Samaritan gives us a hope that there is the possibility of rectifying the situation in the kingdom of Jesus.

Jesus himself probably told this story to shock the hearers into rethinking how God's grace works and the kind of people through whom that grace may come. The situation can take place at any time. Each of the person involved may have sufficient reason to keep away from helping the person in need and he can justify himself for reasons religious or otherwise. The story focuses the attention to the help coming from the least expected situation namely the enemy. He goes out of his way to help and this conclusion would naturally have shocked the audience. Jesus depicts the Samaritan as extremely gracious and caring as he comes to the aid of the injured Jew. In normal life situation, no Jew would have permitted a Samaritan to help him out. What Jesus tells them is that no one can control the avenues of God's grace. The key word that Jesus uses in this story is "compassion" or "mercy". This is not the same as pity. Compassion implies a deep feeling of brotherhood by which one can enter into the suffering of the other and share it. It means to suffer with. Moreover, the "neighbour" in the story is not so much the

man who was helped. The neighbour, the Gospel says, is the one who is willing to show compassion to a stranger who is in need of compassion and help. If all of us really lived according to this way of seeing others, our world would become a transformed place. One can speak of the false gods of race, nation and tribalism. We can overcome these only through our compassion and help to the other.

Today's story has very practical implications. Here we must remind ourselves that Jesus is not giving a "religious" teaching for an elite minority. He is telling all of us how to be truly human. It is the way all people are called to behave towards each other. The Gospel reminds us that we must help those in need even if they are unlike us, even if we dislike them. It reminds that we ought to recognize that we in constant need of help of others, particularly of our God, of whom we have so often made ourselves enemies. It tells us that God's grace comes in all forms and through all kinds of people. As the First Reading puts it, this Law is "not in heaven... nor is it beyond the seas" outside our reach. No, "it is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for your observance". In other words, Jesus is calling us, not to be some kind of unnatural super-being, but to be true and simple, compassionate human person. He challenges us to look at things from God's perspective, and be at the service of others. Indeed, Jesus highly praises the charity of the Good Samaritan and says to the lawyer after telling the story of the parable that he must do likewise. In fact, the Good Samaritan listened to his conscience. He acted righteously and it is this that established him on the path of eternal Life. There is a story told about a small town in Germany that was severely blasted during the last war. Some years later, the buildings were restored. One of the buildings was the town's cathedral. When the renovation was complete, it was noticed that a large figure of Christ the King, which stood in front of the cathedral, was still unrepaired, where both the hands had been blown off in the explosion. When there was no sign of it being repaired, some people went to the parish priest to enquire if he had any plans to repair the statue. He surprised them all by saying that he was going to leave the statue exactly as it was. He explained that, when Jesus ascended into heaven, he took his body with him. He asked us to provide the body (church?), and his Spirit would provide everything else. He would not replace the hands on the statue to remind people that Jesus has no other hands but ours, when it comes to continuing the building of his kingdom here on earth.

Once a man had gone for his weekly market fair and was returning home happy with the purchases he had made. It was pretty dark and the path was very narrow. My mistake he slipped and fell in the pond filled with muck and it was extremely cold. However much he tried to come out he could not and worse still he went on sinking in the muck. He thought his end was near yet he kept on shouting. To his

good fortune a man was passing that way in a cart and when he heard the cries he stopped. He threw a rope to the man and tied it to his horse and with delicacy and difficulty he pulled out the man. Then he took the near unconscious man to his home, washed him of the muck and wrapped him in the blanket. The man recovered in couple of days and he gave him some money to return to his village. The man who had fallen thanked his benefactor for the favour done and asked what his name was. The man replied that he had no need of it and he should relax and go. When the person still insisted the good man asked him a question, the man replied if he knew the story of the Good Samaritan. The man responded positively. Then the Benefactor responded that if he could tell him the name of the Good Samaritan he would reveal his name too. The man thought a while and said it is not recorded in the Bible. Nor will I tell you mine. Kindly go and pray for me and be a Good Samaritan.

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