

Reflection for the Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

The world is an especially tumultuous place at the moment. It seems as though we are dividing into camps, marking some as friends and other as enemies. It is easy to do so. Yet, the readings that we have heard today mind us that we are called to love our enemies and to be generous. These are the two themes on which I want to focus. Living out these two themes will hasten our imitation of the image of the heavenly being described in today's second reading by Saint Paul.

In the first reading, we hear the prophet Samuel tell us about David's act of love for his enemy. Presented with the chance to end his enemy Saul, David instructs Abishai to not strike, to not kill

Saul; rather they take Saul's spear and water jug.

For context, much like the tumult of politics today, the future and leadership of ancient Israel were up in the air. Deborah Wilhelm, a professor at the Aquinas Institute of Theology, compares us to Abishai: we want action; we want to, as she says, send an angry tweet or text, to lash out. It would be so simple, but it would be wrong. It would be ungenerous.

As challenging as that may be, Christ calls on us to be even more generous. The passage from Luke confronts our very comfort; it disquiets us. IT is not an easy passage. It is radical even. Christ encourages us to give; to give to those who need and not to expect something in

return. And we are encouraged to turn the other cheek.

This leads us to ask the question: who is my enemy? It is perhaps easy for us to say, 'my enemy is such and such a country' or 'my enemy is the person who wants to undo such and such a policy if she wins the next election.' In both cases, Christ calls us still to love them, but there is perhaps a different 'enemy' that we could consider. One that our societal norms might portray as an enemy. One that makes sense in the context of Luke's gospel—remember, his is the gospel of the poor. And it is just they—the poor—whom we need to love. Now, I am not saying that the poor are *literally* our enemies. Far from it. Perhaps it is better to say that poverty is the enemy.

I draw us here because our faith calls us to generous and to have a preferential option for the poor. Far too often, the poor are marginalised; their dignity unrecognised; and the supports for them, cut. To be generous means to see the need and to address it, not for one's own gain, but for the betterment of others. It means to recognise the dignity of others, especially the poor.

‘Love for others, and in the first place, love for the poor,’ as Pope John Paul II writes in *Centesimus anno*, ‘in whom the church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice. Justice will never be fully attained unless people see in the poor person, who is asking for help in order to survive, not an annoyance or a burden [or an enemy], but

an opportunity to show kindness and a chance for greater enrichment.’ He continues, ‘It is not merely a matter of “giving from one’s surplus,” but of helping entire peoples which are presently excluded or marginalised to enter in the sphere of economic and human development.’¹

Our Christian identity flows from love; it is a universal and fraternal love. Pope Francis notes, ‘Fraternal love can only be gratuitous; it can never be means of repaying others for what they have done or will do for us. That is why it is possible to love our enemies.’²

¹ John Paul II, *Centesimus anno*, in *Catholic Social Thought: Encyclicals and Documents from Pope Leo XIII to Pope Francis*, third revised edition, edited by David J O’Brien and Thomas A Shannon (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 518.

² Francis, *Laudato si’*, in *Catholic Social Thought: Encyclicals and Documents from Pope Leo XIII to Pope Francis*, third revised edition, edited by David J O’Brien and Thomas A Shannon (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 661.

Love and care for the poor are our duty as Catholics. We have a preferential option for the poor—what this ‘inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future.’³ Whenever possible, our advocacy ought to be oriented to establishing public policy that also has a preferential option for the poor and that recognises the dignity of each person.

Dignity is important because, as Saint Paul points out, each person reflects both the first ‘man’ and the second ‘man.’ ‘For Adam, the first man, was a figure of him who was to come, namely Christ the Lord.

³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, in *Catholic Social Thought: Encyclicals and Documents from Pope Leo XIII to Pope Francis*, third revised edition, edited by David J O’Brien and Thomas A Shannon (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 458.

Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.⁴ This calling is made clear in Matthew: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ... You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’⁵ This was repeated of course in the gospel acclamation from John: ‘I give you a new commandment: “love one another as I have loved you.”’⁶

Despite this period in the liturgical year being called Ordinary Time, our timeline is very unordinary. How then can we apply the message of today’s reading? How can we love our enemies? How can

⁴ *Gaudium et spes*, in *Catholic Social Thought: Encyclicals and Documents from Pope Leo XIII to Pope Francis*, third revised edition, edited by David J O’Brien and Thomas A Shannon (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 187.

⁵ Matthew 22: 37, 39.

⁶ John 13: 34.

we be generous? How can we reflect the image of the heavenly being? When considering the answers to these questions, one can, as I have, cite encyclicals and passages from the gospels and draw on Catholic Social Teaching. This is partially helpful, as it orients us in the direction of answers.

The answer is those two commandments that I cited from Matthew: love God and love one's neighbour. Loving our enemies means relying on God's grace to do so. God loves our friends and enemies, so we need to pray for the grace to see them the way God does.

This is generally a satisfactory answer, but as Deborah Wilhelm points out, we want action. As I prepared for this,

I focussed on the readings in my *Living with Christ*—a focus that was isolated on today's readings alone. At some point, I also needed to check my Bible, and I was reminded that today's Gospel reading is not truly in isolation; rather it follows from last week's. Christ gives us the answer to the desire for action. Yes, love God and one's neighbour, but the way to live it out come from last week's gospel:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Blesses are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, and defame you on account of the

Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

Woe to you who are laughing, for you will mourn and weep.

Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Let us remember to be generous. True generosity means not expecting something in return. Let us serve God humbly and learn to live out the roadmap

given to us in the Beatitudes to be true reflections of the heavenly being in the persons whom we encounter.