

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Mar 21st 2016

“The poor you always have with you.”

The church gives us gospel passages containing this phrase only during Holy Week (Mark 14:1–7 and John 12: 1–8; Sunday & Monday.) Given that timing and the emphasis proper to this sacred time, this Gospel passage is almost never the object of our reflection or prayer. Nevertheless, I think it deserves some attention, if for no other reason than it touches on how the reign of God – which Jesus is inaugurating in the events of this week – will operate.

On its surface Jesus’ statement might seem cynical or uncaring, but that wouldn’t fit with the rest of Jesus’ manifest concern for those at the margins of society. Actually, Jesus is quoting here from Deuteronomy and as such He reflects a reality – then and now. We know from modern probability theory that disparities tend to creep in; if everyone starts even, sooner or later some will end up with more, and others, with less, much less – just from chance alone, altogether apart from the inequalities produced by laziness, cheating, or bad decisions. Deuteronomy in its wisdom recognized that disparities were inevitable and so proposed a system of periodic redistribution of resources to deal with it – a system that would accord with how a people who had been rescued by God from slavery and exile should treat one another.

The principles behind that system remain just as applicable for us today as for they were for the ancient Israelites who, in their story, had been given literally everything. We have to face the fact that this is how God created the world. However, that doesn’t mean that we have to accept the inequalities we find all around us. We shouldn’t throw up our hands in helplessness or resignation, and say, “If this is how God made things, what can I do?” No. God gave His people the ability both to smooth out those inequities and prevent them altogether. That’s what’s behind Jesus’ reminder that we’ll always have the poor with us. That’s also what’s behind Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si*.

It is certainly no less true today that all our resources are gifts. Not just money and property, but talent, family, education, aptitude – everything we have to work with – all gift. We have not so much ownership as stewardship. (Jesus’ parables about stewards and stewardship remind us of the behavior that God expects will follow from such a job.) I want to steer clear here of the emotionally charged battlefield of unregulated capitalism vs. centrally controlled socialism. Both are systems developed for the management of resources – systems located at the opposite ends of an economic continuum. Our job as followers of Jesus is to find a middle ground somewhere along that continuum that both recognizes the fact behind Jesus’ statement and creates an economy that best serves us all. Yes, “creates”. Economies don’t have absolute existence. They are human creations. As Pope Francis stressed in *Laudato Si*, they can – and must – be crafted to produce certain outcomes, such as

maximizing access to purchasing power (e.g., employment). That's what is behind the criticism of current economic systems by Pope Francis (and his predecessors). Objections that he's not an economist, while correct, are beside the point. He is not specifying how to devise such a system, just saying what its purposes ought to be. And those purposes are what lies behind both Jesus' statement about the poor and the insights of Deuteronomy. For Christians, those purposes have to be taken very seriously.

Very briefly, those who have resources must help those who have not, not out of generosity, but out of responsibility. I've always thought "charity" was the wrong word to use here. The kind of sharing is a matter of responsibility, not generosity.

Getting that sharing right is not easy. We each must work at it as best we can, and where possible implant God's values in our economic systems. After all, that's what we pray for when, in the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to inaugurate His reign – His ways of running the world He gave us. It's quite appropriate that we introduce that prayer at mass with "We dare to say . . ." His ways are not ours, and running things God's way will surely disrupt our tidy value systems – will take a lot of daring.

There are twin shoals here that we have to navigate between. Those who have must give without self-righteousness or condescension. And those who receive must do so without bitterness or resentment. Both dangers are hard to avoid.

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