

One of the many folk sayings I seem to have heard all through my life is the classic ‘You can’t teach an old dog new tricks’. I know what it is supposed to mean, but I can’t agree with it either in its imagery or in its moral message. When it comes to dogs and tricks, as a serial rescuer of Border Collies, there is one thing that has never been in doubt. I don’t teach them ‘tricks’ for the purpose of entertaining me or other human beings; they deserve better than that. This, by the way, is one of the reasons why I have always felt uneasy in churches where the children are brought out to show their work to the adults – there can be just too much of the ‘aww – aren’t they lovely’ going on, rather than the appreciation of what they have been learning – and it is one of the reasons why I value the work of the children in our choir, because they are actually leading us in worship and prayer, not entertaining us.

On top of this, my experience with dogs is that they remain eager to learn new things all through their lives. They are creatures of routine and habit, yet relentlessly curious. It seems to me that the proverb is more a reflection of the attitude of many humans, and that leads me to worry that in a sense, many adults are in an important fashion brain dead, where there is no longer an interest in hearing different views, and where we encounter the ultimate in arrogance: ‘I have nothing to learn from you’ – something that those of us who have been teachers occasionally have come across from children who are mimicking their adult role models; it’s unlikely to come out of their own reality, since children are natural learners until they encounter influences that tell them they have nothing more to learn. Like many creatures, they have a natural curiosity.

A lot of the points made in the Lent book some of us have been reading, reflecting the passion and resurrection narratives of John's gospel account into life as it is lived, have to do with things that remain unnoticed and are not understood because the eye of the mind or of the spirit have been dulled – by cynicism or lack of vision. So tonight I want to conclude this series of addresses by exploring some of things people – and that includes me, of course – tend to see but not to see, and suggesting how we might change in order to do something about it.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta often found herself speaking into various privileged situations where, to her hearers' surprise, she would not always be asking for money for the poor people her sisters worked with throughout the world. Instead, she would ask her hearers to seek out and address all the different sorts of poverty around them, and not least the spiritual poverty. Relief of poverty can have many names and many aspects, and those who are most needy are not always those who have little in the way of material things. She points to a whole world of spiritual poverty that we need to come to terms with, as well as some teachings of Jesus which as usual turns all our expectations upside-down.

It is principally in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus turns upside down the pious expectations of the godly, offering instead a new and radical way to be godly. The religious authorities of his time made faith into a manageable thing – something that people could cope with – while Jesus has something far more difficult in mind. *Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.* The life – and death, and resurrection – of Jesus are not a case study in managing expectations, or efficient organisation of God's people. The scribes and Pharisees were in fact past masters at that. Jesus offers something far more

rash, and he invites us to join in. He sees how the careful calculation of the rich allows them to be generous benefactors of the Temple, yet it is the widow with her mite who gains his praise, simply because she has been rash enough in her enthusiasm and love of God to give away everything she has.

Those who have worked in areas of poverty will understand well how difficult it is to gain people's trust if you simply swan in from your position of privilege and comfort to dispense largesse. Living with and alongside the poor in the slums of Calcutta, or in sub-Saharan Africa, or in the favelas of a South American city – this is the only way to gain those people's trust, to help change their lives, to make a real difference. Handing out the crumbs that fall from our own tables to the beggar in the street may well be a start, yet in the end all it really does is to affirm and continue the dependency of the poor on the rich.

This is the danger in all the lovely and sincerely meant social action which Christians engage in – that while we use our food banks and soup kitchens to attend to the immediate needs of the cold, the hungry and thirsty, and even seek to introduce them to the faith which has made us care about them in the first place, we may actually be cementing their dependency, and possibly even asserting our own virtue at their expense. At one end of Matthew's gospel Jesus tells us that we will be judged on our social action; at the other end, he tells us not to let one hand know what the other is doing when we give alms.

This puts us in 'a bit of a bind' to use an old phrase, where the temptation is to stay away from poverty relief (or indeed any active involvement in following Jesus) for fear of getting it wrong. On the one hand, we can't get into the Kingdom of heaven without feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the

sick; on the other hand – well the other hand mustn't know what we are doing. Yet insofar as you did it to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me. There's something to be learned here about humility, and about a something that came into play with the Gdansk shipyard workers in the 1980s – solidarity. And this is what has to be learned over and over again: God in Christ became humble for us – Saint Paul goes so far as to say he became sin for us – so that we might share God's divine life. God, far from being a well-wisher or do-gooder, *joined in* the neediness and poverty of the world. God does not do things *for* us, nor does God make us dependent on divine intervention – no, God *shares* the who and the what of the world in which we live.

This is the kind of perfection Jesus demands in the Sermon on the Mount – a sacramental walking with people in their need; a sacramental being with people in their poverty.

One aspect of this was made clear to me on the occasion I attended a cousin's funeral. She and her sister had after a lifetime of mental illness cut themselves off from both sides of their family, and I was the only family member who went to the funeral. At the front of the church was a line of the sort of chairs you see in the sitting room of a residential home or asylum. And just before the beginning of the requiem Mass there shuffled in my cousin's friends, their bodies gnarled and crippled, or their minds clearly damaged. I had been there for quite some time, praying quietly, and I was startled in my prayer because I found myself wishing they weren't there. In some way they symbolised the state my cousins had descended to from what had been a bright and hopeful future some forty years before.

Then it came home to me that I was spiritually at least as limited and crippled as these people, who increasingly as the Mass proceeded displayed a spiritual simplicity and beauty completely at odds with the way life had left them physically and mentally. The confidence I had in my health, my abilities, my status – none of this counted for anything before God until I acknowledged my own spiritual poverty and my neediness, and I understood that we could share a solidarity where we might possibly learn from each other and be of support to each other.

An awareness of those aspects of life where we are poor and needy, and an acknowledgement of those things before God and before others, is a start on the road to discovering Christ in ourselves, in the world around us, and especially in those who need our service. And it is a profound and rare grace that can really speak into human emptiness and degradation, and by sharing it can lift it up to God.

Let me repeat – you *cannot* change anyone's poverty by making them dependent on you; you *can* transform someone's life by sharing it, making possible hope and a change for the better.

Humility is not a word of the moment. While I see all sorts of qualities – many of them good – in public life, and indeed in the life of the Church, I do not see much humility. Quite a bit of false humility, it is true, but not much of the real stuff. The question that gives it all away is one which was written in my VI Form report in 1975: *He might like to recall, from time to time, Cromwell's appeal to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (letter of 3.8.1650)*. In the days before Google, I had to go to the school library to look it up – and there it was

before me: *I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken.*

You and I, together with all the other Christians of our day – we need to be aware of how much we still have to learn from each other, and by doing so to strive for that very contradictory perfection shown to us in Jesus. We need to maintain that basic humility which allows the thought that we might be wrong; we need to have a lively curiosity that enables us to continue learning throughout our lives; and we need to recognise those parts of our lives where – because we are human – we are only too poor and needy. Then – and only then – do we have a prayer of being able to see and receive Christ through others who are poor and needy – because we know we have received him in our own poverty and humility. And as with the eye-witnesses of the Gospel, so with us, we will start to see our part in the astounding, life-changing, world-shattering things that the Lord has done – and continues to do – if only we will open our eyes and learn.

Here's a concluding prayer from the Jesuit Daniel Lord:

***Let me have too deep a sense of humour to be proud.***

***Let me know my absurdity before I act absurdly.***

***Let me realise that when I am humble I am most human,***

***most truthful,***

***and most worthy of your serious consideration.***

***Amen.***

**PC, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2024**