

If anyone wants to be first he must be servant of all

Homily for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday of Year B

by Fr. Tommy Lane

A beautiful and Christian ideal to have before us when interacting with people is, “Other people are always worth approaching.” When we fail to put it into practice it may be because the other person has hurt us and made it difficult to approach or we foolishly have an air of superiority and look down on others as inferior. But the ideal is, “Other people are always worth approaching.” One person practiced this very sincerely, Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

She was born in 1910 in Macedonia. Her family belonged to the Albanian community. When she was baptized she was given the name Agnes. In 1928, at the age of 18 she decided she wanted to be a missionary for India and decided to join the Sisters of Our Lady of Loreto. She came to their mother house in Dublin where she learned to speak English and took the name Sister Teresa after St Teresa of Avila, the patroness of missionaries. Early the following year, 1929, she arrived in India where she completed her training. She had been sent to Calcutta to study to become a teacher. The children quickly grew to love her and used to call her “Ma.” Her work was teaching history and geography. Eight years later in 1937 she made her final vows.

Sister Teresa felt she was receiving a second call, to leave the convent and live with the poorest of the poor. After a long wait, eventually in 1948 she received permission to leave the Loreto community provided that she kept her vows. She exchanged the Loreto habit for the cheap white and blue sari. First she went to Patna to get medical training as a nurse. Back in Calcutta she went to work in the slums in the streets, to talk with the poor and help them. During this time she was staying with the Sisters of the Poor. The following year, 1949, seven girls joined her in her work. During that year also, Sr Teresa received Indian nationality. In 1950 she got approval for the foundation of the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of Charity. There were 12 sisters then. She needed a house for her work and bought a house which has become the mother house of her congregation. She won many awards including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. On September 5th 1997 Mother Teresa died. Fifty years after the foundation of the Congregation there were 3000 Sisters working in over 500 missions in 100 countries.

Because of her work in helping the poorest of the poor she was called the “Saint of the Gutters.” She would see Jesus in everyone she met. It didn’t matter whether

they were dying of AIDS or leprosy. She wanted them to be able to die in peace and with dignity. Mother Teresa said, "love begins at home, love your family and your neighbors. Share with the poor and needy around you your smile, your word, your time, your belongings. See God's presence in the people you meet daily and treat them as children of God. Serve and love one person at a time. God does not want us to love crowds of people, that is an impossibility. He wants us to love Him in every single person we meet, when we meet that person." We can see Mother Teresa fulfilling these words of the second reading today from James,

...the wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without inconstancy or insincerity. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace. (James 3:17-18 NAB)

Mother Teresa is a perfect example of someone who always considered others worth approaching and someone who lived as Jesus asked us to live in today's Gospel (Mark 9:30-37). The disciples had been arguing about which of them was the greatest so Jesus said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35) Then he took a little child, set him in front of them, put his arms round him and said, "Anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name, welcomes me..." (Mark 9:37) Having a big income has become very important now but is it the most important thing? In the Gospel today Jesus says if you want to be first you must make yourself last of all and servant of all (Mark 9:35). If you are not doing anything to serve the Church or the community would you consider doing something to serve the Church, to help the Church? When we serve others we receive something that money can never buy. If we do not have that treasure which money cannot buy why not? The second reading today warned about confused priorities:

You do not possess because you do not ask. You ask but do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. (James 4:2-3 NAB)

There are treasures that money cannot buy and when we serve others we receive something money can never buy and Mother Teresa gives an example of this:

One evening we went out and we picked up four people from the street. And one of them was in a most terrible condition. I told the Sisters: "You take care of the other three; I will take care of the one who looks worse." So I did for her all that my love can do. I put her in bed, and there was such a beautiful smile on her face. She took hold of my hand, as she said one word only: "Thank you" - and she died. I could not help but examine my conscience before her. And I asked: "What would I say if I were in her place?" And my answer was very simple. I would have tried to draw a

little attention to myself. I would have said: “I am hungry, I am dying, I am cold, I am in pain,” or something. But she gave me much more, she gave me her grateful love. And she died with a smile on her face.

(Acceptance Speech for Nobel Peace Prize in 1979

Also given at National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., Thursday February 3rd 1994.)

When we serve we receive something that money can never buy.

With the example of Jesus and Mother Teresa before us we can ask ourselves, “What is our attitude to others?” Do we always consider others worth approaching? If we do not, why not? Is it because they have hurt us and we have not yet forgiven them or is it because we like Jesus’ disciples on the road think we were the greatest? I will conclude with the prayer of St. Francis:

Lord, make me a channel of your peace,
that where there is hatred, I may bring love,
where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness,
where there is discord, I may bring harmony,
where there is error, I may bring truth,
where there is doubt, I may bring faith,
where there is despair, I may bring hope,
where there are shadows, I may bring light
and where there is sadness, I may bring joy.
Lord, grant that I may comfort, rather than to be comforted,
that I may understand, rather than be understood
that I may love, rather than be loved.
For it is by forgetting self, that one finds,
it is by forgiving, that one is forgiven,
it is by dying that one awakens to eternal life.

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This homily was delivered in a parish in Ireland.