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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
November 22, 2020 Streaming Mass
Christ the King - Year A Mt 25:31-46

The magazine, Scientific American, published an article a couple months ago about what they called the “empathy deficit” in American society. After listing all the pain that we are currently experiencing as a nation, viz., the coronavirus pandemic, racial injustice, economic insecurity, political polarization, misinformation and a general uncertainty dominating our lives, the article noted it’s not surprising that many people are barely able to cope; that anxiety, depression and other psychological problems are on the rise. Whenever people are hurting or troubled, they want to feel that other people understand what they are going through and are concerned. People are often so preoccupied with their own struggles that they aren’t attuned to other people’s problems, as they otherwise might be. We all tend to underestimate the hard time others are going through, especially when those people are different from us. Hence, the “empathy deficit.”

An example of that was something I came across a few weeks ago. The Archdiocese sponsored a Zoom conference about racism. In the course of the discussion one priest mentioned a conversation between two women. Both were mothers of teenage boys, one woman was white and the other black. The women were talking about how each of their sons had just gotten their driver’s license. The white mother said how happy she was, that after so many years she no longer had to chauffeur her son to parties, to sports or school events. She was finally relieved of that burden. The black mother, on the other hand, had a very different reaction. She expressed how worried she was about what might happen, if her son were stopped by the police, and somehow the situation got out of control. Two mothers, facing the same situation, but with completely different reactions. Another example. Two weeks ago volunteers from St. Thomas More and Good Counsel, with help from Catholic Charities, distributed bags of food to 382 families in front of Our Lady of Good Counsel Church. People living only a few blocks away, many who had lost their jobs, enduring food insecurity. Today’s Scriptural readings challenge us to get out of our “bubble” to be aware of what others have to go through, and to do what we can to help.

In a very concrete way Jesus identifies Himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the immigrant, the insufficiently clad, the sick, the imprisoned, so much so that each of those who claim to be His disciple will be judged by how well or how poorly, they, we, have treated such people. We hear the same message in the Letter of St. James who writes, “We love the God we have not seen in the neighbor we have seen.” We are not

called to love humanity in the abstract, but in the particular. From the Christian perspective, life only has meaning when it is lived in such a way that it expresses itself in concrete acts of compassion, of caring, of attention to the needs of others, especially those less well off than oneself. St. Teresa of Avila makes the same point when she says, "One day our lives will be judged not by the wealth we have amassed, or the prestige attached to our name, but by the simple measure of love: how we have given of ourselves to those who have crossed our path in time of need or distress."

We know as Jesus Himself said, "the poor you will always have with you," and we know the poor will always be taken advantage of. The prophet Ezekiel, who provides the backdrop for Jesus' choice of imagery in the parable, says as much. He says that it is God's will that the sheep be taken care of; that they be given food and protection, healing and rescue. Ezekiel says God will be their shepherd because those whose job it was to take care of the flock, *viz.*, the rulers of Israel, have failed to do so. They have looked after themselves; they have exploited the flock. Even within the flock, Ezekiel says again, there is evidence of unfairness: there are the sleek and the strong who can take care of themselves, and then there are the rest—those who need to be rescued from danger, those who need to be nursed back to health.

As we read today's Scriptural passages, it becomes clear that God will accomplish His plan of shepherding the weak through the efforts of those who possess the vision of Jesus, through those who are led by the Spirit to recognize in the most vulnerable of society a special claim upon their time, their talent, their resources. St. Teresa says in another place that in the world today, "Jesus has no hands but ours, no feet but ours." In short, we are the ones called to continue His healing presence. We will never find the real Christ in our hearts or in our churches unless we have first found Him in our streets, among those who need what you, what I can provide. People, of course, may differ on precisely how that help can be offered, but there is no question that we are supposed to do something.

Christianity, as a religion, is more than a list of do's and don'ts. It more than just trying to feel good about ourselves. It is that we try to be sensitive and compassionate; that we help when we are able to help. And in that very process we become more like Him Whom we claim to follow. We may not be able to do much, but each can do something. As that time of the year approaches, when it is so easy to get caught up in the celebration of conspicuous consumption, let us focus in on what really matters, how we can develop a sense of empathy, how we can be the presence of Christ in a broken, fragmented world.