

Quinquagesima February 14, 2021

Poor old Christopher Plummer, that wonderful actor, often stuck with all those repeated interviews on television. Only very occasionally did he show his discomfort and dislike. How did he do it? Perhaps it's because he was such a good actor. A good actor has charity. He has enough sympathy to get under the skin of his characters. He can be all things to all men. A bad actor cannot do this. He lacks charity.

So first of all, we have to have charity. We don't have to like everyone. It's not "Thou shalt like thy neighbour as thyself." It's "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." We have to love everyone. And that means an act of the will - moving in sympathy towards people we would otherwise avoid.

And the same applies with God. It's not "Thou shalt like the Lord thy God." It's "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God." We may well not like God very much when he contradicts us, dresses us down and puts us in our place. But we do have to love him, to move in sympathy towards him and try to understand him.

Charity is required. And charity is an act of the will. But it's not just an act of the will, for then it may degenerate into a mania for interference, bossiness and fussiness, possessiveness and the desire to have someone dependent on you. Charity has to have discretion and wisdom or it can turn into self-importance and curiosity. True charity sometimes means not interfering - leaving someone alone.

Charity is an act of the mind as well as of the will. The mind and imagination must shape our acts of will. We must know what it feels like from the other person's point of view. A bad actor cannot do this. He cannot make the scoundrel, the hypocrite or the coward into a sympathetic character, and because he cannot make sympathetic characters he fails to move the audience.

Without charity then we are not real. Without charity we are locked up in our little selves. Charity requires that we come out of ourselves: that we move from the superficial level of likes and dislikes, of embarrassment and awkwardness, distancing and avoidance, to the much deeper level of human solidarity.

Christian charity requires that we explore this common humanity. To feel our way under the skin of the coward or the scoundrel is not just to find out about oneself. It is to feel our solidarity with everyone, even people we dislike, and to realize the human solidarity and guilt that Christ took on himself. In so doing, Christ raised charity to a new height.

To feel our way under the skin of the scoundrel is to feel our solidarity with our forbears and to recognize how we would have felt as they did. Long before our time, First Nations were driven from their land. We didn't do it. Of course we didn't do it. But the idea that we would have done any differently is so much tosh. It is self-righteousness to distance ourselves from the guilt of sins committed long before we were born. It is denial of that solidarity that is fundamental to understanding Christ.

The point then is not to believe we are normal men and women adjusted to society as it now is and therefore right. Because then we are locked into all the mistakes of the present age. If we believe we are normal members of a normal society we can be politically correct but we can never be convicted of sin. We will never understand the solidarity and guilt that Christ took upon himself. Christian belief is quite different. It is that we are normal members of an abnormal society and our individual sins are both the product and the cause of the sin of society. This is how it really is. Christ recognized this in the most profound way possible. He is the perfect example of human solidarity. And we are in Christ, the universal man who stands in judgement over this present age. It is in him that we begin to grasp what Christian solidarity might mean.