

SPIRITUALITY OF THE HEART

Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary

Conference
on
Spirituality of the Heart
and
Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

Organised by
Chigwell Justice and Peace Centre
For
The Millennium

Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary

REFLECTION ON MATTHEW 25

Do you want to meet the man who came to save all humanity?

Don't look for him among the rich and powerful;

He is the brother of the poor, the small, the outcast.

Don't look for him near the flashy lights of wealth, success and power;

He is in the darkness of the stables of our world,

where people suffer from illness, loneliness,

anxiety about the future.

Don't look for him where pleasant days follow in succession;

He is in the deserts of thirst and hunger,

where people fight for their dignity,

for reconciliation and peace.

Don't look for him in the world of rivalry and competition;

He is where people renounce their own rights

for the sake of love and justice,

where they give and give of themselves

because they are lovers of peace.

Anon

A Peace Maker's Heart

Introduction

We are faced with the challenge of bringing together two seemingly unrelated topics – the spirituality of the Sacred Heart and Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation. In our current post-conciliar Church it would appear that the first, the Spirituality of the Sacred Heart, represents an outmoded devotion with no future, and the second, JPIC, a challenging, but as yet insufficiently grasped path into the future.

Today's reflections take it for granted that we do not have to persuade anyone of the importance of JPIC. However, there may be something *indigestible* in the way we perceive JPIC which makes it both unappetising and difficult to chew. We may know in our heads the importance of commitment to justice, but it may remain a theoretical and cerebral commitment that does not touch our hearts. The scope of the JPIC may appear so vast as to overwhelm us and leave us paralysed and helpless. If we are indeed convinced of its importance, but also crippled by a sense of impotence, that may well increase within us feelings of guilt as well as helplessness. Hopefully, an appropriate spirituality of the Heart may provide us with new heart and new courage as we face these truly gigantic issues of JPIC. On the one hand, spirituality of the heart may provide a human focus to these massive and impersonal issues. On the other hand, JPIC may provide a badly needed broadening of dimensions of traditional Sacred Heart spirituality, and help in the ongoing reformation and purification of the Church as she takes the next bold step forward in hope.

Our Congregation's Experience

As a congregation we have been obliged to reflect upon the relationship between the two. We were confronted with the harsh reality that our *aggiornamento* chapter had been insufficient to reverse the decline in our congregation's membership. We opted for a process of deep reaching reform, realised the need to rediscover our founding vision and express it in a way which is both relevant and inspiring to people of our time. Like several other congregations, we were founded in France in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Like other congregations, we were founded to work exclusively with the poor. The original title chosen for our Congregation was Servants of the Sacred Heart.

We undertook widespread consultation and reflection in the congregation and concluded that if our Founder lived in the contemporary church he would certainly be among those prophetic figures who embody what has become known as a “preferential option for the poor”. He would also embrace wholeheartedly the contemporary Church’s commitment to justice and the need for ongoing conversion in this regard for all members of the Church.

Despite the apparent unity of today’s theme, we are in fact being invited to bring together a number of items that seemingly are not necessarily related. The first of these is *spirituality*, the second is *Heart*, and the third is *Justice*. I would like to reflect very briefly on each of these three words.

Spirituality

I shall use the word Spirituality to refer primarily to the way God approaches us rather than the way we approach God. There are three aspects in particular that deserve emphasis.

First, we believe that God always acts *creatively*, opening up new possibilities to us as individuals and also as communities in the contemporary church and in the contemporary world. In this sense, he is always the “*God of surprises*”. He is like the householder Jesus refers to in the gospel, who is able to take new and old things from his cupboard.

Second, we believe that God always acts *lovingly*. “*The spirit we have received is not the spirit of slavery but the spirit who cries out Abba, Father.*” It is the Spirit who casts out fear and creates a loving response within us. “*The love of God has flooded our hearts by the Spirit who has been given to us.*” This causes us to be led not by the flesh but by the Spirit of Jesus. This Spirit prays within us when we do not know how to pray and calls out, “*Abba, Father.*”

Thirdly, we believe that God’s creative love always *empowers*. Paul makes a graphic reference to our fundamental helplessness as human beings. “*The things I want to do I don’t do, and the things I don’t want to do are the very things I do.*” He refers to our permanent inability to translate good intentions into appropriate actions. Rahner points out that our reaction to Jesus’ promise to send us his spirit of power is to expect to feel *powerful*, whereas Jesus emphasises the importance of being *powerless*. The values of the Kingdom that he proclaims permanently challenge the values of this world, which influence us more profoundly than we might care to admit.

- a) We need empowerment by the Spirit of Jesus to share his attitudes and values and imitate his conduct.
- b) We need empowerment by the Spirit of Jesus to *“put on the mind of Christ”*, and to think and judge as he does.
- c) We need empowerment to make the spirit of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount the bedrock of our lives.

The Heart

Central to devotion to the Sacred Heart is the phrase from Mathew’s gospel. *“Learn of me, for I am meek, gentle and humble in heart.”* The traditional response in ejaculatory prayer is: *“Lord, make my heart like your own.”* This is the fundamental attitude of the disciple of all times and places. Indeed, metanoia or change of heart is the basic response of all people of all times to the gospel. We are familiar with its gospel synonyms to repent and be converted but *“change of heart”* is obviously one with particular appeal to us. To appreciate the contemporary significance of this phrase, however, we need to appreciate the importance of the biblical concept of heart.

The biblical concept of heart is wider than the vital organ that pumps life-giving blood through our body. It is a profound and complex concept that can be applied both to God and to humans. Every day in the Benedictus we sing about the *“loving-kindness of the heart of our God who visits us like the dawn from on high.”* John’s epistle contains wonderful words that seem to apply the word *“heart”* to God and humans simultaneously, *“Even when our hearts condemn us God is greater than our heart.”*

“Heart” refers to what the Bible considers the most essential dimension of human existence: our capacity to love, understand, judge and choose. Every day we recite the words *“Today if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.”* These words help us to recognise the fundamental choice we face: whether to respond to Jesus’ invitation by change of heart or to resist it by hardening our hearts. The biblical concept of heart does not draw unnecessary distinctions between thinking and feeling, between mind and heart, between intellect and will, between body and soul. A simple saying of Jesus illustrates this: *“Where your treasure is, there your heart is too.”* The heart is the source of all true valuing and choosing. The parables of the pearl of great price and the treasure hidden in the field end with identical conclusions: the discoverer hurried to sell all that he possessed in order to obtain this newly discovered treasure. Jesus uses this as a mental teaser to help his listeners understand the implications of responding to their desire to *“love God and*

neighbour wholeheartedly and single-mindedly.” It demands an uncompromising choice: *“You cannot serve two masters, because you will love one and hate the other.”*

Justice

The word “justice” is of course shorthand for the phrase *“Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation.”* This word has acquired almost explosive force in the post-conciliar Church, particularly since the 1971 synod which declared that *“the pursuit of justice is a constitutive dimension of the Church’s mission.”* It is intimately linked with the expression *“option for the poor.”* It is a key concept in both the Old and New Testaments and is inevitably linked with the word peace. Together the two words are like two sides of the same coin. In the psalms we read, *“Justice shall go before him and peace will follow his steps.”* *“Mercy and faithfulness have met; Justice and Peace have embraced.”*

Metanoia – Change of Heart

We wish to grow in the image of Jesus by thinking like him, loving him and acting like him. To express it more formally we want to share his attitudes and values and imitate his conduct. There are two questions each of us needs to answer in relation to this.

- 1) What exactly is required to grow in the image of Jesus? What is the cost? How much do we have to pay?
- 2) How much do we really want to grow in his image? Is our response one of mere lip service or are we really determined to pay the price?

The answer to the first of these questions is relatively simple. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray he incorporated it into the Lord’s Prayer in the phrase: *“Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* This is the driving force of Jesus’ life as he illustrates by comparing his heart felt desire to do his Father’s will with the human need to eat, *“My food is to do the will of him who sent me.”* He instructs his disciples that among their many and often competing desires and wishes one alone must be paramount. *“Seek first the Kingdom and its justice and all else will be given you.”* If any further emphasis is needed he provides it in the Beatitude which says, *“Happy are those who hunger and thirst for justice for they will be filled.”* Justice is concerned with making God’s will a reality on earth just as it is in heaven; it means living by Kingdom values and renouncing values, known in the Bible as “worldly”, values which are opposed to

these. God's will for his people is summed up in one constantly recurring word in the Bible: "*Shalom.*"

Shalom in the Bible

God's will is not so much what we do for God but what God does for us. This inevitably brings us into a deeper reflection on the biblical concept of "*shalom.*" This word is inadequately translated into English as "peace" – but the English word needs to be supported by many other words in order to capture the depth, breadth and scope of the Hebrew word. Peace is often understood in a negative way as the absence of war, but in Hebrew it is something positive. Various shades of *shalom* are translated in e.g.

- Jesus' affirmation that he has come that we may have life and have it to the full; fullness of life is an expression of *shalom*. When he invites those whose work is hard and burdens heavy, to come to him – he will give them shalom, rest. When he says "*my yoke is easy and my burden light*" this also captures images of shalom. After the calming of the storm *shalom* reigned again over the lake.
- The human activity most associated with Jesus' *shalom-making* activities is healing. This work of making whole, restoring health, vigour, strength is associated with the shalom brought by God's creative spirit, who in Genesis hovers over the chaos at the dawn of creation, and continues to hover over the chaos that continually threatens fragile human lives, communities, societies, nations and creation itself.
- The divine activity most associated with Jesus' *shalom-making* activities is his work of forgiving and reconciling. "*Has anyone condemned you? Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.*"

Luke, more than any of the other evangelists, captures the peace-making purpose of Jesus' entire life and mission. He describes his account as "*the good news of peace*". In announcing the birth of Jesus, the angels equate the glory of God with peace to all of goodwill – reminding us of Irenaeus' latter saying that "*the glory of God is the fully alive person*". In describing the first act of Jesus' public ministry, preaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, Luke selects the reading of Isaiah promising new sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, movement to the paralysed, and good news to the poor. The principle means by which Jesus does this are the inter-related activities of preaching, healing, reconciling, restoring community, and his general acts of power.

Scripture scholars acknowledge the central role that that *shalom* plays in the Bible: *shalom* has been described as God's dream for his creation. The Hebrew word is so rich in meaning that it is impossible to translate by a single word. It is associated with the general concept of "well-being" – which does not appear very exciting in English, except in the echoes we find in Julian of Norwich's "*all will be well, and all will be well and all will be gloriously well*". This is echoed to in the soothing noises made by mothers to frightened, hungry, or suffering babies down through the ages, "Ssh, it's alright", and the baby goes back to sleep again. Millions of women repeat these words at this very moment in troubled spots throughout the world. They too are frightened, hungry, suffering and yet they manage to persuade their babies that everything will be alright. Somehow this strong indomitable hope lies deep and fervent within the human breast. The Bible assures us that this hope and longing for *shalom* will not be ultimately disappointed because it corresponds to God's own deep and irrevocable plan for humanity and for the whole of creation.

Conversion to Peace: Jesus the Peace-Maker

"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God" is one of the Beatitudes which is a clear and indisputable indicator of the essential attitudes and values of Jesus. If we truly want our hearts to resemble that of Jesus, then our lives need to radiate the Beatitudes. The current challenge for us is to deepen and widen our understanding of the dimensions of the peace ministry and go beyond the personal to include social, national and international dimensions. Perhaps we can illustrate this through indicating three major challenges to peace at the level of global society. There is the first issue of systematic and systemic discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, class, age or disabilities. Secondly the whole question of non-violent resolution to conflict at all levels from the interpersonal to the social, national and international levels. Thirdly, there is the whole approach to violence, including institutionalised violence, and the development of a non-violent approach to life.

Each of the four gospels shows how central *peace* is in the mission of Jesus. There are three distinctive elements in John's account of the first appearance of the Risen Jesus to his apostles. Two factors have destroyed the apostles' *shalom*, - their own abandonment of Jesus in his hour of greatest need has left them ashamed and guilty; fear for their own fate has caused them to barricade themselves indoors. The Risen Jesus pierces the barriers they have erected and restores their peace with himself, with themselves and between themselves. Then, he shows them his wounded hands and side – showing them the price he has paid for their peace. Finally, he sends them out on their peace-making mission, "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*"

Luke's account of Jesus sending out the apostles on their first mission emphasises its peace-making dimension. They are to bring *shalom*; if people of peace live in that house they are to stay; if not, they are to leave and let their own peace return to them. Jesus knows from personal experience how vulnerable his followers become in their desire to offer and make peace. Indeed, the final act of the public life of Jesus, described only in Luke, is the incident following the so-called triumphant entrance into Jerusalem some days before his death. Jesus sits on the hill overlooking Jerusalem and weeps over the city and its inhabitants, because they have not recognised the signs that make for their peace. Jesus weeps, both because they have refused the offer of fullness of life, and also because he sees the consequences of their refusal.

Compassion, Gentleness and Peace-Making

If we seek to identify a central characteristic of Jesus essential both to understanding the Heart of Jesus and the commitment to Justice and Peace, that characteristic must surely be compassion. Luke completes his version of the Sermon on the Mount with the words "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate". The word *compassion* involves more commitment than the word *pity*. Pity involves feeling sorry for, but little more than that, whereas compassion also involves an element of solidarity, i.e. standing side by side with, being ready to share the lot of the person(s) with whom one feels compassion.

Mark introduces the miracle of multiplication of the loaves with the words "*Jesus had compassion on the multitude*"; this is repeated in the other synoptic accounts. Matthew however places these words in a context that makes compassion much more central to the very mission of Jesus, "*He had compassion on the crowd because they were like sheep without a shepherd*".

Compassion is the virtue identified by Guttierrez as the most important virtue for those who wish to stand in solidarity with the poor. In our reflection on a spirituality of the heart that promotes peace-making and the pursuit of justice, compassion therefore is clearly a central virtue. The virtue of compassion also underpins the Beatitudes of the poor (and those who stand in solidarity with them), the broken-hearted (and those who seek to comfort them), the hungry (and those who seek to feed them).

There is another essential but often misunderstood quality for an appropriate spirituality of a Heart that brings peace. It is reflected in Matthew and used in a gospel for the Feast of the Sacred Heart. "*Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart.*" The word *meek* in English is often associated with spinelessness and

caving in. This is the very opposite of what the word means in the original Greek. Barclay tells us that the same word *meek* describes the quality of an ointment that takes the sting and pain out of a wound and prevents it from becoming infected; it is also the word used to describe the quality of those who tame wild animals. It describes the quality therefore of people who go to dangerous situations and remove the danger; it is a combination of courage and skill. It is the quality of those who confront evil and danger, who learn to overcome their fears and anxieties so that these do not inhibit their actions. It is also the quality of those who experience anger but are able to control rather than be controlled by it, so they are angry at the right time, for the right reason, in the right way. Clearly, this too is a quality that we need to pray long and hard for if our hearts are to resemble Jesus and if we are to share in his peace-making work.

Challenges for Spirituality of the Peace Ministry

In order to become effective channels of the Lord's peace, perhaps we need to deepen and broaden our understanding of *peace*. We often associate peace with quiet, this may well be legitimate if we compare a situation of violent unrest, or of frantic worry or serious squabbling with the quiet that rules when normal relations are resumed. However, there is another sense in which peace and quiet can be used – when, for example, we refuse to become involved in the suffering of another and pass by on the other side, when we withdraw from the plight of the poor, sick and suffering into a cosy little world of our own. This complacency and refusal to become involved has nothing to do with the peace that Jesus comes to bring. It has been remarked in this sense that Jesus has come to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed. He has come to unmask “false” peace.

An appropriate spirituality of peace needs to ensure that our understanding of *shalom* is sufficiently comprehensive to address four inter-related levels. The first level is that of *inner peace at the personal and individual level*. The second is *peace at the level of inter-personal relationships and also of face-to-face community*. The third extends to *peace at the broader level of society, and includes national and international dimensions*. The fourth extends still further to the level of *peace for the entire creation* and has its own title of working for “the Integrity of Creation”.

It seems fairly safe to say that for many of us, our pursuit of peace is more clearly linked with the first two dimensions rather than with the latter two. The first is the inner *shalom*, the peace of mind and heart that comes from being in right

relationships with God, our neighbour and ourselves. This is a peace that we all long for and is alluded to by Augustine in the famous words, “*You have made for yourself O Lord and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*” The second is the inter-personal and community dimension which involves creating and maintaining relations of *shalom* with others whom we encounter in a face-to-face situation. This entails preventing or resolving problems that may arise from our dealings with others, including differences and conflict. Anyone who has ever encountered difficulty in either giving or receiving the sign of peace at Mass will recognise some of the problems and challenges that this raises. It recalls the realism of John’s words about the claim to love God whom we do not see when we fail to love the neighbour whom we do see.

The third dimension of peace is perhaps more daunting, but one which we urgently need to integrate into our conceptions of peace to be effective in our JPIC ministry. It is concerned with peace at the level of society, and includes national and international peace. This involves not only good will but also politics and economics and social conditions. To understand the importance and urgency of some of the challenges facing the peace ministry at this level, some illustrations may help. There is clearly a need to address what has been described as the “*apartheid of gender*” at all levels of society – including the Church. This means identifying and addressing instances of systematic prejudice and discrimination on grounds of gender. The same needs to be done to address systematic prejudice and discrimination on the grounds of race, class, age and disabilities. Above all, this dimension is concerned with the non-violent resolution of conflict, with the prevention of war and where this is not possible, with promoting speedy and just conclusions.

The fourth dimension of peace, safeguarding the integrity of creation, reminds us of the fundamental task of stewardship. It is intimately linked with the concept of sustainable development that is ensuring that the current generation does not deprive future generations of the means of development by irresponsible use of non-renewable resources. This involves intense concern in environmental issues.

An appropriate spirituality will recognise the universal scope of God’s love and his burning desire to bring *shalom* to *all* dimensions of creation. It will realise, therefore, the importance of broadening one’s concern for peace-making beyond the personal, inter-personal and community dimensions, without minimising its importance at these levels. It will recognise the need to be concerned for peace-making at the level of society and nations and indeed at the level of creation itself.

A Peace-Maker's Heart

If it is true that the whole of Jesus' mission can be summed up in the word *shalom* and we have a heart like his, then we too need a peace-maker's heart. We are conscious, once again, of the promise made to the prophet Ezekiel, "*I will take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh... I will pour my own Spirit upon you.*" God's Spirit is a creative spirit who produces a newness that may surprise and overwhelm us. It is the Spirit of Jesus alone who is able to reproduce the mind and heart of Jesus within us. It is he alone who can enable and empower us to share his attitudes and values and imitate him in his conduct. It is the Spirit who creates *shalom* in our individual hearts and our communities, and helps us to work with others to bring this peace to our society, our nation and to the whole family of nations. It is the Spirit who creates in us sparks of God's universal love both for the whole of humanity and also for the whole of creation; he stretches our hearts and broadens our minds.

It is the spirit of Jesus too who teaches us in the words of Ignatius of Loyola, "*to pray as if everything depends on God, because it does, but to work as if everything depends on us, because it does*". It helps us to strike the right balance between prayer and action.

Perhaps there are two conclusions we might draw in relation to a Spirituality of the Heart and the pursuit of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation.

First, for all those who, in honesty, feel they have not yet committed themselves to this invitation, it is the Spirit of Jesus who inspires us to make our initial on-going commitment to pray and work for peace in all its four dimensions. Through his Spirit, Jesus continues his peace-making and healing work in us. He heals our blindness to provide us with the insight and vision necessary to "*read the signs of the times*" as Vatican II urges us to do. He heals our deafness so that we hear the cry of the poor, the oppressed, the suffering and respond to Vatican II's pledge that "*the hopes and fears, joys and tears of the people of this world are those of the people of God*". He heals our paralysis so that we get up and walk, to take the first decisive and radical step in the way that leads to peace by way of justice. He heals our heart, takes away our luke-warmness, compromise and reserve and helps us to love in a more wholehearted way like Jesus himself, giving us courage to embrace whatever suffering and hardship is necessary to bring genuine peace and compassion to God's suffering people.

Secondly, for those who have already committed themselves to the way of peace but suffer the gamut of conflicting emotions that comes with it, the way of peace is also the way of the cross and it is inevitable that discouragement dogs our

footsteps at our lack of success. We also know what it is to succumb to compromise and half-heartedness and then feel guilty about it. This is surely a situation which Jesus refers to when he says *“Come to me all of you whose work is hard and whose burdens are heavy, and I will give you shalom”*.

Conclusion

This approach to Spirituality of the Heart is not proposed as an addition to what we do in our daily community life of prayer. It is seen rather as a focal point, a lens, a paradigm through which we meet and respond to the love of the Risen Lord whose sole desire is to share with us his own peace that the world can neither give nor take away.

It is also proposed as a way of encouraging us to commit ourselves to the cause of peace-making as desired by the Heart of Jesus. It may help us to respond effectively when we feel overwhelmed at the immensity and scale of the problems if we recall that our concern for peace-making is a contribution to the burning concern of Jesus to bring peace. It may also help to bring a more human and gentle approach to the unrelenting work that needs to be done in the whole area of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation.

A Heart that Seeks Justice

Introduction

Many of us experience fundamental difficulty in even thinking about Justice, Peace & Integrity of Creation; we feel overwhelmed by the scale of the problems addressed, and this leaves us feeling powerless. JPIC addresses root causes of so much human suffering that perhaps we do not even know where to begin. Once we do manage to begin it is easy to see how we get caught into a whole host of frantic activities that never seem to end. Moreover, there may not appear to be an obvious link between the different campaigns we become involved in. An example might illustrate this. As a congregation we have been very active in campaigning for Third World Debt cancellation. We were involved before the formation of Jubilee 2000, played an active role in promoting Jubilee 2000, and will continue to do so when Jubilee 2000 dissolves. As our sisters in Africa and Latin America are only too aware, however, little if any progress has been made in reducing crippling debt repayments in these continents. This is only one

example of a whole host of urgent pressing causes that come under the Justice umbrella. It is an example of involvement in politics, economics and social action undertaken by so many people in the Church in recent years as a consequence of our "*option for the poor*" that lies at the heart of the contemporary Church's commitment to justice.

In this reflection I would like to suggest once again that an appropriate spirituality of the heart can provide a human focus to our approach to *Justice*. It can do this by helping us both to make a fundamental "*option for the poor*" and to remain faithful to it. Moreover, this commitment to Justice can help ensure that our approach to the Sacred Heart is not over- spiritualised.

This afternoon I would like to focus upon one particular injustice, but one which is so pervasive that the United Nations has called it the "*apartheid of gender*". For many years this century South Africa pursued a racist policy of apartheid which personified prejudice and discrimination on racial grounds. In the last decade of the old millennium apartheid - discrimination on grounds of race - was formally abolished. The UN points out that prejudice and discrimination on the grounds of *gender* are even more pervasive than prejudice and discrimination on the grounds of race, and that there is an urgent need to address gender discrimination in an effective way. In Europe and America the movement for women's liberation has been very active in recent decades; it is also controversial and can be divisive. In Africa and Latin America, there has been such a rapid deterioration in women's status in recent decades that there is an undeniable, urgent need to address this.

Throughout the so-called "Third World", recent years have seen an enormous increase in what is described, rather inelegantly, as "*the feminization of poverty*". In Africa, fragile living standards have been thoroughly undermined by constant economic decline in the last twenty years. The proportion of people living in absolute poverty has risen dramatically. In Zambia alone the World Bank estimates that 85% of the population live in absolute destitution, unable to meet their basic needs. Africa is home to three quarters of the world's poorest, most indebted countries; it is also at the epicentre of the world's HIV/Aids epidemic. The World Bank and the United Nations both say that 80% of people who live in absolute poverty are women.

In what ways can an appropriate Spirituality of the Heart inspire us in the quest for Justice in this basic human right and in helping to resolve the "*apartheid of gender*"?

Hungering for Justice

One of the problems in our search for a spirituality of the heart that seeks justice is our lack of role models. However, it seems to me that Jesus provides us with an excellent role model in one of the parables. She may be a historical figure or simply a character that Jesus invents for the purpose of his parable. She is a widow who takes on the corrupt and powerful in her quest for justice. She is the main character in the parable Jesus tells about the widow who demands justice from the unjust judge. In a sense she is a very contemporary figure. Our sisters who work in home based care for families affected by HIV/Aids know only too well that in Africa widows are likely to be very young rather than older. They also know how vulnerable widows and their children are to many kinds of injustice. One of the key characteristics of God in the Bible is that he is the protector of widows and orphans. He hears the cry of the poor. In recent years we have become conscious that our *“option for the poor”* which lies at the very heart of our commitment for justice, is a reflection of God’s own option for the poor. In Africa there has been an enormous increase in the number of homes where the mother or sometimes the eldest girl in the family is left to raise the children single-handedly without any support from the father or the state. There is a very real sense in which their plight is similar to that of the biblical widow and orphans. It is a fundamental issue of justice reflecting ways in which men, in recent years, have acquired *“rights”* at the expense of women.

The widow in the Gospel suffered from two disadvantages. First, she was unaccompanied by a male relative; decent women were not supposed to appear unaccompanied by a male relative in court since the administration of justice in court was seen as a task for men alone. Second, the judge is corrupt and is prepared to decide in favour of the party who offers the biggest bribe. The widow, however, is poor and unable to offer a bribe. Her only advantage is her insatiable hunger and thirst to see to see justice done; she knows she has been mistreated and is not prepared to accept this injustice. The battle between the poor widow and the powerful magistrate resembles the fight between David and Goliath in that the two partners seem very unequally matched, but in the end, the apparently weaker party prevails; might is not always right. The widow’s only weapons are her voice and her persistence. Her refusal to give up eventually wears down the unjust judge who grants her justice. *“Maybe I have neither fear of God nor respect for people but since she keeps pestering me I must give this widow her just rights, or she will persist in coming and worry me to death.”* The true surprise lies in the conclusion in which God is compared to the unjust judge. *“Now will not God see justice done to his chosen who cry to him day and night*

even when he delays to help them? I promise you he will see justice done to them and done speedily."

Compassion, Justice, Love

In order to reflect fruitfully on a spirituality of the heart that promotes justice, perhaps we need to begin by reflecting on fundamental images of God. An authoritarian image of God is likely to instill fear rather than love and is unlikely to inspire us to make a preferential option for the poor. The problem may be even greater when, either consciously or unconsciously, we regard God as masculine rather than feminine.

All human beings experience a fundamental problem when speaking and thinking about God. In the words of St John: *"No one has ever seen God. " We see traces of God, have experiences of God, believe fervently in his presence, but as St Paul says "We see through a glass darkly". Our knowledge of God is fundamentally limited and imperfect.*

The underlying image of God is extremely important for a spirituality of justice, since in traditional theology God's justice is sometimes pitted against his mercy. Weekday preface II states, *"In love you created us, in justice you condemned us, but in mercy you redeemed us"*. Contemporary theology based on renewed scriptural images offers new insights and paradigms to resolving this. The key to it is the renewed emphasis on *justice* as a major Biblical concept, which, far from being opposed to God's love and mercy, is an essential quality of his covenant love.

There are two other basic questions currently being asked with regard to traditional images of God. The first is why it appears to be taken for granted that God is male and elderly. If this were stated in the form of a proposition it would certainly be condemned, and rightly, as heretical. However, the most sacred notions of our faith are expressed in terms of father and son. Our current awareness of language provides theological alternatives which may be improvements. How would we react to the replacement of the traditional words in the sign of the cross by "In the name of the Creating, Saving and Sanctifying God"? How do we react to the uncomfortable impression on the part of people in "traditional" Christian countries of Europe and America, that God is white and maybe middleclass?

Thomas Aquinas says the only thing we can know for sure about God is what he is not. Theological language takes human qualities and virtues, strips them of

limitations by adding a prefix and applies them to God. Thus we refer to God as *almighty*, all *powerful*, all *knowing*, all *merciful*, all *just*. Recent theological and scriptural reflection goes further than saying that our images of God are limited. Some images of God contained in the Bible are, by today's standards, "pagan and superstitious". Sometimes we run up against these in the psalms. Thus we praise the everlasting love and mercy of God in one psalm, and among the things we thank him for is the way he has destroyed the enemies of Israel – drowning them in the Red Sea, killing their first born, and commanding Israelites to smash the heads of babies on stones. There are problems here that surely need to be addressed.

Compassion, Justice and Innocent Suffering

The Dominican theologian Schillebeekx suggests that leaders in the Christian church very early in its existence made an unfortunate and fundamental error in the adjectives applied to God by placing God's power before his compassion. Compassion makes us vulnerable and powerless rather than powerful. It raises fundamental questions about the way we think about the mystery of the suffering of innocent people. I intend to raise merely one of these questions without attempting to discuss it. In Africa, in a "normal" year five million children die before reaching the age of five; they die from preventable diseases, caused mainly by grinding poverty but also compounded by lack of necessary knowledge of good nutrition, etc. In what way is it God's will that they suffer so much and die so young? The situation clearly contradicts Jesus' words: "I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly". It also clearly contradicts Irenaeus' words "*The glory of God is the fully alive person*". For these children, for their families and communities there is no *shalom*. In this morning's reflection we describe *shalom* as God's dream for his creation. Massive and profound human suffering on this scale, far from being God's will, is deeply offensive to him. It seems clear, therefore, that we cannot say it is God's will to let such massive inequalities build up in a world where a handful of nations dominate the majority and allow unspeakable suffering to become the lot of most. Traditional theology would distinguish between what God positively wills and what he merely permits, and would say that this is an example of God's permissive will. The argument goes that since God has given his creatures free will, he has to accept that they may abuse this freedom, and in this sense, consequences of this abuse of freedom can be classified as "*permissive will*". Contemporary theologians, like Schillebeekx, argue that situations like these require us to fundamentally re-think the meaning of the word "powerful" applied to God. They argue that the crucified Jesus, the epitome of innocent

suffering, is a truly Christian expression of God's power expressed in *powerlessness* rather than *powerfulness*.

Time does not permit an exhaustive examination of all the dimensions of justice. I will, therefore, concentrate once again upon the requirements necessary in a spirituality of "*a heart that seeks justice*". I shall do so by asking a rather fundamental question, however. Whose heart are we talking about - a man's or a woman's ? white or coloured? rich or poor? In answer to these questions I presume once again that we are talking about a heart for whom the Beatitudes and the values they represent are genuinely good news. That is to say, it is people who either *are* poor, broken hearted, hungry and persecuted *or* people who so identify with them that they can be truly called "poor in spirit", they are merciful, gentle, and are peace-makers. As such they are neither male nor female, white or coloured, rich or poor; they are people who are acutely conscious of the barriers that unjustly divide people; and of the obstacles to true peace.

The Heart of Our God: Qualities of God's covenant love

God's covenant begins with his response to unjust and profound suffering among his people. The paschal experience begins in Exodus with the words "*I have heard the cry of my people, I have seen their suffering*". Through Moses he proposes to save them and make a covenant with them. "*I will be their God and they will be my people.*" Exegetes highlight the following qualities of God's covenantal love. These qualities are perfected rather than replaced in the New Covenant made in Jesus.

First is *tender-loving-kindness*. This is expressed in several biblical images. God's love is compared to the tender, loving kindness of a mother nursing her young baby. He loves us so much *he has carved us on the palm of his hands*. In Hosea his love is compared to the fervent love of a young groom for his bride. God is also compared to a young father teaching his child to walk and holding him close to his cheek as he picks him up. The most powerful images of all, of course, are found in the Song of Songs.

Second is *faithfulness*. Even if it were possible for a mother to forget her infant baby, God could never forget his people. We can be faithless but God remains ever faithful; he cannot go back on his word.

Third is *mercy*. He knows the weakness of the human heart and understands our straying and sinfulness. He is always ready to forgive and forget.

Fourth is *justice*: a creative aspect of God's love – he creates or restores *right relations*. He does this particularly for vulnerable marginalized people who may, in varying degrees, be excluded from the community. The prophets were particularly sensitive to the social justice implications of the Covenant. They describe God as the God of the poor and identify three particular examples of the poor- the widow, the orphan and the stranger. Some gospel incidents in particular illustrate this; the reaction of the Compassionate Father in the story of the Prodigal Son who runs to meet and embrace his son is an example of justifying love; the reaction of Zacchaeus, to restore fourfold what he has defrauded is an example of justified love. Biblical justice is invariably connected with protecting the rights of the poor.

Prophetic Call to Justice

The prophets played a key role in reminding Israel's political and religious leaders of the obligation of the covenant with regard to the poor. They are filled with Yahweh's in a way that keeps them in touch simultaneously with God's will for his people and with the plight of the poor. They are particularly indignant at the breach of *social justice* when the rich and the powerful abuse their position to take advantage of the poor. They argue that this goes directly contrary to what God requires of his people in their covenant with him, who is the Protector of the poor, epitomised in the widow and orphan. Jesus appears as the true prophet who befriends the helpless widow of Naim, in the widow's mite, in the parable of the widow and the unjust judge, in Anna. He is reflecting the covenant God who protects those who are the least of all and last of all. He is the one who brings true justice. We note that true justice consists in doing the Father's will.

Whole-hearted Love of God: Jesus' Abba Experience

The phrase "radical living of the gospel" is another way of referring to wholehearted, single minded following of Jesus. It is related to the little parable that concludes the Sermon on the Mount, about two men who build houses, one on sand, and one on rock. When the storm comes one house collapses, the other stands firm. Jesus invites us to build our house on rock. This is echoed in Paul's prayer "*that our lives may be rooted and founded in love*". Jesus reminds us that it is not enough simply to offer lip service; to say one thing and do another. It is not sufficient to say "*Lord, Lord*". The one thing necessary is to do the will of the Father. This is a lesson we may presume he learned from practical experience at home from his earliest childhood. There, his parents taught him by example as well as by word the meaning of the first and greatest commandment: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength.*" We have no way of penetrating directly into Jesus' heart to learn just

how he loves God. We can do this only indirectly, using Scriptural clues offered to us.

We know that Jesus' intense public activity was fuelled by his personal prayer, alone, at night and early in the morning. The agony in the garden and his words on the cross offer the most graphic commentary on the content of his prayer at the most decisive moments of his existence. There he teaches us the essence of true love and self-sacrifice. *"Abba, Father, dear Father, let this cup pass from me ...nevertheless, not mine but thy will be done."* He reminds himself that there can be *"no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends,"* and that as Good Shepherd he needs to lay down his life for his friends. St Paul comments that it is through his blood that that he brings peace to our broken world that he, in his own flesh, breaks down the barriers that divide people and makes us one.

When Jesus encountered people with *"eyes to see and ears to hear"*, with rich and noble hearts, he shocked their common sense and awoke in them a new and truly transforming experience of God. This is based on what Scripture scholars have called his Abba experience. Jesus experienced first-hand, the tender-loving kindness of the heart of our God, his faithful, merciful, compassionate love that is expressed in his passion for justice.

Jesus' relationship with his Father is one of love, not duty: he shares God's creative, saving love for his people and wishes to make all things new, Jesus is the Father's beloved Son in whom he is well pleased. His own transforming experience of God's loving purpose for his people caused astonishment among the people. *"We have never heard anyone preach like this; he preaches with authority, not like the Scribes and Pharisees."*

The Message of Jesus

Each gospel has its own distinctive way of presenting the life and teaching of Jesus. The evangelists make creative use of common tradition to adapt their message to the needs of the particular community they are writing the gospels for. This influences the way they present Jesus' message, especially his great commandment of love. When we pray, *"Sacred heart of Jesus make my heart like yours"*, we are responding to the invitation of Jesus to come to him, learn of him and follow him. I take for granted that a contemporary Spirituality of the Heart focuses on helping us to concentrate on learning to love as Jesus loves. There are in the gospels five distinct expressions of Jesus' commandment of love. A Spirituality of the Heart aims at integrating all of them into a distinctive way of following Jesus radically i.e. whole-heartedly, single-mindedly, without

compromise. This means that we are aware of the permanent temptation to contradict by our actions and lifestyle what we profess with our lips; we therefore commit ourselves to ongoing vigilance and change of heart as Jesus himself requires in the gospel.

1. Love your neighbour as Yourself: the Golden Rule

The first, described as the Golden Rule, *“Love your neighbour as yourself”* i.e. treat others like you would like them to treat you. Luke includes this in the introduction to the parable of the Good Samaritan; this is the foundation of all the others. It is expressed in the two-fold injunction to do no harm, on the one hand, and to do good on the other. This is a universal command and necessarily includes love of the anonymous other.

2. A New Commandment: Love one another as I have loved you

John’s account of the Last Supper contains both the foot washing, an example of loving service, also a graphic illustration of the way Jesus exercises authority, and of gospel values in which greatness consists in being the last and least of all. He gives his new command, *“Love one another as I have loved you”*. *“There can be no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends ... You are my friends if you do what I command you.”*

3. An active love, full of initiative for the anonymous poor, sick and suffering.

Jesus builds upon and extends the golden rule. In Luke’s version of the Good Samaritan, the Lawyer wishing to justify himself asks *“Who is my neighbour?”* The purpose of the question is to seek to limit his obligation. At the end of the parable Jesus changes the question, *“Which of the three proved himself a neighbour to the person in need?”* His command, *“Go and do likewise”* makes it incumbent among all Christians to be good neighbours to *all* who suffer. *“I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me to drink, naked and you clothed me, a stranger and you welcomed me, sick and you visited me, imprisoned and you consoled me.”* As long as you did it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters you did it to me. This reflects the pattern of Jesus’ lifestyle, *“He went about doing good... he did all things well”*.

4. A generous love seeks no reward

Not seeking a reward is an important characteristic of this kind of love. Matthew’s version says, *“If you love those who love you how different are you to pagans and tax collectors – they do the same.”* Do not give because you hope to receive. *“When you give a party invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; the fact that they cannot repay you means that you are fortunate”,* you will be

rewarded when the just rise again. St James emphasises this when he says “*true religion is care of the widow and orphan, the weak, the little ones*”, the epitome of the poor, the helpless, the easily oppressed.

5. A compassionate, merciful love that includes enemies

The command to love enemies is the acid test of our discipleship; without it we cannot be genuine disciples of Jesus. This is reflected in the permanent requirement to forgive those who offend us, no matter how often or how much. It is preceded by the command that we refrain from all forms of revenge, retaliation or resistance to evil. When Jesus refers to “*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*” he is not speaking about personal revenge but a form of community justice, in which a judge punishes the wrong-doer by imposing a certain amount and type of punishment in proportion to the amount and type of injury or crime committed. Jesus says his followers should not extract revenge under any circumstances. He shows clearly the spirit in which he himself leads his life. “*If they strike you on one cheek turn the other*” ... something he practised during his arrest and passion, “*If they force you to go one mile go two*” ... shown later in his carrying of the cross ... “*If they take your inner garment give your outer garment too*” illustrated in Jesus being stripped of his garments.... “*Give to anyone who asks you*” ... In the end he gives his life, and as St Paul tells us, “*He died for us while we were still sinners*” - enemies. Later on St Paul illustrated the quality of the love of Jesus in his Hymn of Love – 1st Corinthians.

Conclusions

An appropriate spirituality that promotes justice and facilitates a preferential option for the poor will be both *unquestioning* and *questioning*. It will be *unquestioning* about the absolute necessity of the radical following of Jesus. This entails wholehearted and single minded love of God and neighbour. This is what Jesus means when he tells us “*To seek first the kingdom and its justice*”; this is simply another expression of what he teaches us in the Lord’s Prayer, “*Thy kingdom come; thy will be done*”. To imitate Jesus in his wholehearted love means sharing his tender, loving kindness, his faithfulness, his mercy and above all his justice. Justice is the quality of God’s love that makes it inclusive by ensuring that the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized and excluded are given first place.

However, the spirituality that promotes justice will also be *questioning*. It will question the appropriateness of images of God that exclude and marginalize, that promote images of power and authority that are contrary to those proclaimed by Jesus. It will question images of God that fail to radiate the tender,

loving kindness and compassion of the heart of our God who identifies with the widow, the orphan and the stranger.

To conclude, perhaps we look again at a possible model for our spirituality of a heart that promotes justice. It is the widow in the Gospel. Jesus praises her single minded persistence and refusal to give in to discouragement. She is an example of a person who hungers and thirsts for justice, whom, Jesus promises, will be filled. She is an example of a person for whom the Beatitudes and the values they represent are genuine good news. In her pursuit of justice, her experience of God and her image of God changes. She becomes aware of God creatively upholding and supporting her in her search for justice. In this way she experiences him as Emmanuel, God-with-us, but with us in the poor rather than the mighty, the least of all rather than the famous, with us in the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, and in the stranger. May we also share her experience of this creative compassionate God upholding us and supporting us in our search for justice and peace.

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