

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 7/Sexagesima Year C 2019

I am sure some of you here have been in the embarrassing situation of receiving something, of a gift being sent to you and at some point the giver said, *did you ever get what I sent? I never got a thank you note.* And probably what followed was awkward moment when you thought to yourself, *oh yeah, I didn't. Oops.* We often think that a gift is supposed to be free, without obligation. But it's not too hard to see that is rarely the case. It was the French philosopher Derrida who articulated something of this dilemma of the gift, what he called, 'the economy of exchange'. Yes, a gift should be utterly free. It should be gratuitous. Yet, he noted, that every gift seems to awaken in the one who receives the need to reciprocate. At the very least with a word of 'thank you'. Which is probably just polite, and we're probably glad about that. But deep down we will probably think of some way of returning the kindness shown in the giving, that we should respond with a gift of our own.

Derrida suggested that people could actually attack their enemies by giving them gifts. It puts the giver in a superior moral position. This may be something of what is going on in the Old Testament reading today with David sparing the life of his now-enemy Saul. And in this he assumes a certain moral authority, becomes the better man. Now, there may be some genuine mercy and affection that David shows Saul. But in the long run, this act of mercy serves David well, adding to the respect and admiration others have of him, and securing his kingship over and against Saul. Those who have devised our lectionary clearly have in mind that something of an altruistic spirit lay behind David's action. But it also clear that David benefits from his action.

For most of us it would seem that it is truly impossible to freely give a gift. Because gift giving seems to lock us into a pattern of exchange and obligation. It seems almost impossible to say I truly, really, actually am giving you this gratuitously and freely. We all feel compelled to somehow acknowledge what is given. Is this not the cause of so much stress, anxiety and heartache around Christmas: the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle!) interplay about who gives what. It really does seem that in our fallen, imperfect world, absolute, pure gift giving - giving without strings attached - is a pretty rare thing indeed.

Think for a moment even on those who bestow gifts upon the church. Often gifts do come our way that are generous and anonymous. But this in fact is rare. Often gifts come our way with certain strings attached. An old vacuum, an old piano or wardrobe, a stained-glass window, or other donations so often are given on condition: only if in constant use, only if prominently displayed, only if a plaque is involved, only if a name is inscribed. And untold offence is given if these conditions are violated. Normally when a gift is given, the giver supposedly loses control. But not in the church it seems. The giver – and sometimes even their descendants - so often wanting to continue to pull the strings. Even in the church...

But the church ought to be the place of course where *something else* is modelled. Because at the heart of our faith we find the one great exception to the dilemma of exchange. At the heart of our faith we find One great exception to the awkwardness of this giving: God! God, the great Giver. God who gifts us with creation. God who gives the commandments and covenants. God who gives us his Son, who gives us saving grace (and grace simply meaning free gift!). Precisely because God is perfect nothing can be added to him. God stands in need of nothing. Nothing returned to him would do him any good. Therefore, God cannot be caught up in this dilemma of exchange. He can't be recompensed. And so God can give in utter freedom.

Now, we can put this whole gift-giving 'thing' into the context of love, and the great biblical idea that *God* is love. Thomas Aquinas identified love as *desiring the good of the other*. So often we understand love in superficial or sentimental terms or in terms of self-fulfilment, the satisfaction of our desires. And when 'our needs' aren't being met, we walk away from love. That is the great perversion of love and celebrated, even, in our day. But in God, who *is* love, we see the One who truly does desire the good of the Other. And so, God, as love, can give and not expect anything in return. God loves in the purest possible sense. He cannot be caught up in the dilemma of exchange. God can truly, purely, give.

So, while it is perhaps very difficult - in our fallen, imperfect state - in the *natural* order to give gifts, *it is possible* for us *through grace* to participate in God's way of dealing with things. If we are grounded/rooted in God, then *we can be as God is*. We can act as God acts. As Paul says, *it is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me!* Or as Paul expresses in the Epistle today, we can be *modelled on the heavenly man*. This is the gospel! This is the good news! The earthly man, Adam, does not have the final say.

We are not condemned to continue forever the fatal dead ends. A new model, a new man, is made for us in Christ. We might not, in our flawed, imperfect state, be able to say I can truly give a free gift. But if *we can say*, it is not I, but Christ who lives in me, then the old patterns need not have power over us. I can be as God is, I can act as God acts. As the Fathers tell us, *God came unto us, that we might come like unto God*.

And so, the sayings of Jesus we have placed before us in the Gospel today we might say are not for the natural person, for the man of dust, modelled only after the first Adam, but for the *super-naturalised* person. These sayings of Jesus just do not make sense in a purely natural context. A natural person - modelled after the 'earthly man' - cannot live what Jesus proposes. But, the super-naturalised person - the one modelled after the heavenly man - can. If we love with the love that God is, we can live this way.

As we hear it proposed to us today: *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly*. In other words: *give to those from whom you can expect no return*. Love, not so that you be loved in return. Just love the way God does! *Bless those who curse you*. In this it's not possible to play the game of economic exchange, you're not going to get anything out this! You're simply giving. *Give to everyone who asks of you. And if someone takes something from you, do not ask for it back*. See how this moves us into the an entirely new spiritual space. It ends - it breaks - that dilemma of exchange. And in case we miss the point: *for if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you.... if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?* If we love those who love us, do good for those who do good for us, if we give to those who give to us, always expecting something in return, then it's not really love, is it? It's not really a gift.

If you're upset because didn't get that thank you note; if you're still brooding because someone you thought ought give you a present for Christmas didn't; if you're still waiting for a return invitation for the dinner party you gave three months back; if you're cross that parish council decided something given in 1927 has passed its used-by-date, then you remain stuck in that economy of exchange, still caught in the patterns of the old Adam; you haven't moved into the space of pure grace. *Love your enemies. Do good to them. Lend expecting nothing back... then you will be children of the Most High*. The whole programme of Jesus' teaching is dependent on the assumption that we, in him and through him, we be super-naturalised. The good news of God in Jesus Christ is that by grace we can give, we can love with the love that God is. Amen.