

How do we give?



“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Luke 6:38). We all know there are various ‘measures’ of giving - some give willingly and with abundant generosity, some give grudgingly, some give of their superfluity, of what they don’t really need, some give of the little they have and really feel it - but just what is involved in giving as Jesus asks us to? And what is this ‘good measure’ that will be poured into our own laps? Sometimes we can be rather subtly lured into a kind of giving, attractively presented to us, but which is really about receiving. We are all familiar with the appeals of various charities or fundraising endeavours, for example, that promise that in return for our giving we will be in the draw to win some fantastic prize. There’s something in it for us! The attraction of the chance to win something or personally benefit in some way can be a strong motivator. But here is a story that will rattle any complacency about that! In a conversation about poverty and charity with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, Pope Francis told this story:

“Once, when I was bishop, I was sent an invitation for a benefit dinner for Caritas. Those who attended were the cream of the crop, as they say. I decided not to go. That day, the president at the time was in attendance and, after the first course, a gold Rolex was auctioned off. What a disgrace; how humiliating. That was a bad use of charity. It sought a person who would use this watch for vanity in order to feed the poor. Sometimes things are done in the name of charity that are not charitable; they are like crude caricatures of a good intention. There is no charity without love, and if vanity is part of helping the needy, there is no love; it is feigned charity”.

Some very challenging thoughts here! It is not uncommon today to find people paying huge amounts to attend such things as gala dinners to raise much needed funds which are put to

wonderful use, and make a significant contribution to improving the lives of those in need. We cannot deny that there is good in that, and many supporters of those events might wonder just what might be questionable about it - those who have much, enjoying a lavish dinner or bidding for something expensive, and in the process helping those less fortunate than they are. And of course, nothing is amiss there. Nothing, that is, if you are looking at it from a secular perspective. It is simple humanitarian aid, and yes, there is a level of generosity in it too, even though it is self-rewarding. But not if we are Christian, not if we profess to be a follower of Jesus. Not if we take the Incarnation seriously. And not, if we take seriously the invitation of Jesus to remember that whatever we do to anyone, to the least of our sisters and brothers, we do to him. And certainly not if we want to receive that 'good measure' he spoke of. Why?

Pope Francis calls this feigned charity. It is pretend charity. Elsewhere in that same conversation he says: "There are things that are called works of charity when, in reality, they are social-conscience calming activities. These kinds of programmes are carried out in order to feel good about oneself, but love always requires a person to go out from himself, to truly give himself to others". Our pope does not mince his words! And he is in good company when he speaks in this way because what he says takes us right into the heart of Incarnation. And as we think about the Incarnation and what this means for us, we begin to see just what it has to say to us about charity, about the manner of our giving.

"The word became flesh", says John in his Gospel, "and lived among us" (John 1). The God of love, compassion and mercy, hitherto known in and through the Teaching, the Torah, the beloved Law of the Jewish people, and through the prophets of ancient Israel, is now seen in the flesh, walking, talking, interacting, touching, healing, forgiving, reaching out in an embrace as wide as life itself, and drawing everyone into that embrace. The literal Greek expression of the translation, 'and lived among us' is, 'and pitched his tent among us'. There is something so earthy, ordinary, real, relational and very, very intimate in that expression. God is revealed as being intimately part of human life, woven into the very fabric of what it means to be human. This is where and how we see and know God. The previously-considered inscrutable God is now present, person to person. As John says, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known".

The Incarnation is at the heart of our Christian understanding of God. We are the only World Religion that understands God in this way, as revealed to humanity not simply through word and story and teaching, but in the life of a person, the person of Jesus, in his flesh and blood existence two thousand years ago. Of course, to make this claim is to do theology. It is what we call a christological statement; an understanding and interpretation of the person of Jesus, and this *began* with those who knew Jesus 'in the flesh', who walked the countryside and villages with him and who encountered him in many different ways. They began to wonder and

question who he was, and some of those Jews who followed him believed that he was indeed the Messiah, the one sent by God. And as time went by they not only acknowledged him as the Messiah but they saw in him what they recognized as something 'of God'. It took a while for this to be fully developed into the theology or christology we have today. We refer to this development as the *apotheosis*, a Greek word meaning to deify or make divine. And we find this understanding expressed quite early in the writings of Saint Paul who refers to Jesus as being "in the form of God" (Philippians 2), then in Luke's birth narrative where this has been written back into his story in the form of the angel telling Mary that the child is to be called Emmanuel, which means God-among-us. And of course we find it in John's Gospel in his utterly beautiful Prologue: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God and the Word became flesh". Centuries later, in 325, this was fully clarified by the Council of Nicaea in the formulation of the creed, "God from God", after many years of debate, disagreement, argument and the appearance of a number of so-called heresies, each having something to say about the nature of Jesus.

Well, what does this all mean for us? How do we take the Incarnation seriously? And what does it have to do with the particular way we give charity and care for those who are poor. With all this elevated theological language we can very easily fall into the trap of losing sight of what it means for us, personally, in our everyday lives. And when theology fails to speak into the ordinary, everyday lives of people, we end up with a dead religion. So how does the Incarnation invite us to live in a way that authentically honours what we profess in our belief in it. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we find a quote from Saint Athanasius: "The Son of God became man so that we might become God". This simple yet mind-blowing journey is what we are called to when we set out along the path of Christian life. We are called to journey into our own transformation, to 'share in the divinity of Christ', as we say in the Catholic Mass.

Just today I was speaking to Year 11 about giving, about how we as Christians need to understand charity, and about what this asks of us, because what is asked of us is far more than dipping into our pockets. Christian charity asks of us that we be willing to let *ourselves* be shaped and formed in a certain way. I read the girls Pope Francis' story about the Rolex watch and we watched a video clip of him visiting a shanty town in Rio when he was there for World Youth Day last year, and we thought about what he had to say. Francis said that we must bridge the gap between the rich and the poor in a spirit of solidarity and that harmony and happiness will not be attained in a society that ignores, pushes to the margins or excludes, a part of itself. The pope's words are a far cry from handouts. This is about solidarity, connection, shared humanity. The poor are not 'the other'. In fact, from a Christian perspective there is no 'other'. And this is where incarnation pops up again because it has something quite profound to tell us about our relationship with those with whom we share life. Not only are we all created by God, but together and individually, we are the incarnation of God

on earth. We are all part of the body of Christ. As St Teresa said in her famous prayer: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good ...". We are Christ's body on earth. The Incarnation of God as Jesus, two thousand years ago, continues now in each of us. We are each called to transformation, to become Christ-like. And when we take that seriously we must come face to face with that flesh and blood man, Jesus, who lived two thousand years ago. He will show us the way.

There is a defining characteristic and a pattern in Jesus' interaction with people. In his giving, his healing, he engaged with people personally. Often he saw their need but asked them anyway what they wanted him to do for them. Their deep desires, their particular needs and pain mattered to him. He looked at them, he called them, touched them, and often he heard their stories. And, through their encounter with him these people were restored to mainstream society, to the communities from which they had been marginalized. This was no mere handout. It was a restoration to life. Whether it was healing a leper, a blind man, a woman who had been haemorrhaging for twelve years, or a woman who was isolated and shunned because of her personal life, in each case, the physical or emotional relief that this encounter brought to them, also meant that those people could be returned to mainstream society, the communities from which they had been marginalized due to their illness or disability. Jesus was deeply aware that poverty of any kind, whether it be physical or mental illness, sin or material poverty, cuts people off from society. They are looked upon as 'the other'. And I do believe that it is when we see them as 'the other' that we slip into the impersonal, feigned charity that Pope Francis speaks of, giving from a distance and happily receiving a prize in return.

There is no instance of Jesus giving and expecting to receive, or even worse, limiting his giving to the possibility of a reward! Such a thing is an insult to the dignity of the recipient. It destroys relationship. Could you honestly look into the eyes of someone to whom you have given some aid and tell them that you won a BMW or a flight somewhere for doing that? Such giving turns the giving back onto the giver, and it becomes more about us than our fellow human being, our sister or brother in need. The Gospel texts sometimes say that Jesus 'felt compassion' when he saw people's needs. And once again when we look to the original Greek expression translated as 'felt compassion', we see that it was literally, 'his gut churned within him'. This is a person to person response, a flesh and blood response to a fellow human being. There is nothing self-serving in Jesus' giving. "I have come so that all may have life, life in abundance" (John 10:10), he said, and he set about doing just that, wherever he was, and for whoever came his way. This is what we are asked to do too! The way is mapped out for us: "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Pope Francis says: "In Christianity, the attitude we must have towards the poor, is in essence, that of true commitment. This commitment must be person to person, in the flesh. The sick must be cared for, even when we find them repulsive and repugnant. Those in prison must be visited ... it is terribly difficult for me to go to a prison because of the harshness of life there. But I go anyway, because the Lord wants me to be there, in the flesh, alongside those in need, in poverty, in pain. We cannot accept the underlying idea that 'we who are doing well give something to those who are doing badly, but they should stay that way, far away from us'. That is not Christian".

In light of this, it is not hard to see that there is something inherently disordered, for example, in sitting down to an extravagant meal, enjoying the finest food and wine, in order to feed those who are starving.

So Christian spirituality invites us to see that 'The Incarnation' leads to incarnation; the 'body of Jesus' of two thousand years ago leads us into being the body of Christ today. And each of us must work out, according to our particular circumstances and abilities, just how to be Christ's hands, feet, eyes and compassion on earth - now. The invitation is to look in the mirror and see that the image reflected back is 'Jesus in me'. A daunting thought? It certainly is, but the way is simple, the way is love. In December last year Vatican Radio hosted a photographic exhibition entitled 'Why Poverty?' Each photo was accompanied by some words from the popes of the last century on the theme of poverty. The excerpt from Pope Francis reads: "Believing in Jesus means giving him our hands, to caress the little ones and the poor". We will each need to work out how to do that. There are many kinds of poverty, it is with us wherever we are. We need to be attentive to it, sensitive to where we are, and perceptive of need. And when we do give to those whom we cannot see and we do not know, we can personalize that and touch them, encounter them. We can listen to their stories, look into their eyes, look *out through* their eyes, hold them in the intimacy of prayer, remember that we are called to share their suffering and sorrow because we share our sacred humanity, because Christ lives in us. We can take part in that cycling event or that fun run to raise money, but if there is a prize offered for the one who raises the most money ... well, that is the time to really think about what we're doing. With Lent almost upon us too, we can think about what we might go without so that others may have. We might choose to eat very simply for a while - the bowl of rice or the corn - or even fast for a day if we are able to, in solidarity with those who are starving, rather than sit down to a great meal when we set out to raise money. We will taste a little something of what they know only too well. Let's *feel* our giving, let it come from our 'fasting' and not from our 'feasting'. Anything less than that may feed the poor and clothe the naked, but it will not allow us to manifest, here and now, the God that Jesus revealed.

So yes, we will receive, as Jesus said. But what we will receive will be from God, and of God. It will be the joy of slowly growing into the most perfect and authentic expression of our humanity, of becoming Christ-like, of being the 'place' of God's dwelling on earth.



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