

BECAUSE I AM A CHRISTIAN

Johnny Cash was a popular country music singer who among other things was known for giving free concerts in prisons. When asked why he did that, he was supposed to have said, *Because they're a great audience and because I am a Christian.* He understood the words Jesus speaks in the gospel today.

Several weeks ago in St. Matthew's gospel we heard about the importance of love of God and love of neighbor. In today's gospel, we see how these two are fused together. The duty to love God and our neighbor may be distinct but never separated.

Love, active love, determines who is good and who is bad and there's no substitute for active love. The importance of doing works of mercy is not new. It is part of Jewish piety and something with which people would be familiar. What is new is how now it is not just a work of mercy to someone in need, but a way of ministering to Christ himself. Jesus doesn't say, *It's as if you did it to me* but rather, *you did it to me.* What a marvelous, beautiful and at the same time, scary, radical vision is here. Christ can be as close as someone in need, perhaps as close as someone next to you.

While it is always important to pay attention to what Jesus says, it is also important to pay attention to what he doesn't say. Jesus doesn't say we have to solve world hunger but that we have to help feed the hungry. He doesn't say we have to cure all diseases but that we have to care for the sick. Simply put, we have to do something. This gospel reminds us that our decisions are important. Our decisions determine who we become. God takes our decisions seriously and so should we. If we don't, the result can be disastrous.

In the first part of Matthew's Gospel, early in Jesus' public ministry, we find the Sermon on the Mount and the lead off to that is the Beatitudes. That could be called Jesus' keynote address. He calls blessed the humble, the pure of heart, the peacemakers and the merciful. Now we are near the end. Jesus has preached and healed in Galilee, made his way to Jerusalem where he continues his work. If the Beatitudes are the keynote speech of Jesus' teaching, this could be the grand finale. This is the last teaching Jesus gives prior to the start of the Passion. You could see this as a fleshing out of the beatitudes, particularly, *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*

There is something curious about this passage. Throughout the Bible, including Matthew's gospel, we have heard again and again the importance of faith. Now faith can be seen as belief and as trust. However, there is no mention of faith here, not even once. We find only works of mercy or the absence of such works. Is faith no longer important? No. Faith remains very important but so is showing mercy. It has been said that to show mercy to those in need is not a denial of faith but rather it is the essence of faith. We read this passage as part of the greater whole of the Bible.

You can take it one step further and say that to see Jesus in those in need *is* an act of faith. By faith, we learn to see Jesus in the Eucharist under the form of bread and wine. It is an act of faith and trust in Jesus' words that we make every time we celebrate the Eucharist; every time when at Communion we say, *Amen*. And it is an act of faith to see Jesus in the forms he describes to today: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned. Honestly, perhaps sometimes we don't want to see Jesus in them. But we do well to remember that the Jesus who says, *This is my body . . .* is the same Jesus who says, *I was hungry and you gave me food.*

To see Jesus present in the Eucharist requires an act of faith and to see Jesus in those in need also calls for both an act of faith on our part; and, an active faith which may not solve the problems of the world but will call us to serve Christ in others. This gospel should prick our conscience or at least challenge us to not close us in on ourselves but to draw us out of ourselves to see Christ in others. A mature faith doesn't sit still. A mature faith does something. A mature faith acts.

These six categories form the basis of what we call the corporal works of mercy, how we serve the physical needs of others. Over time a seventh emerged which is to bury the dead. There are also what we call the spiritual works of mercy which are: To instruct the ignorant; to counsel the doubtful, to admonish sinners, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive offenses, to comfort the afflicted and to pray for the living and the dead.

We can see these categories Jesus gives as representing many types of people with many types of needs but all needy and a means of encountering Christ. *I was a stranger and you welcomed me.* There could easily be whole homily on that. The stranger can be someone who looks, acts, talks, thinks or votes differently from us. Welcoming the stranger can certainly apply to the welcome we show or don't show to others whether it be people in our own neighborhoods, refugees fleeing for their lives seeking asylum or the unborn just seeking to live.

Clothing the naked can be seen in many ways, including the unborn. We can see Christ in our neighbor in so many different ways and we can serve Christ in our

neighbor in so many different ways. Perhaps it may be something as simple as *I was down and you cheered me up. I was sad and you made me laugh.*

This radical vision of Jesus and of seeing him in others reveals a different type of king with a different type of kingdom. This king travels among his subjects in disguise. We are not all called to work in soup kitchens or to do prison ministry but we are all called to treat others, particularly the poor and those in need, with mercy—To live lives of mercy and to keep our eyes open for Jesus in all those we meet. If our hearts are open, our minds and our hands will be open as well just as Christ the King opened his heart and his arms on the cross to embrace all. This is a different type of king with a different type of kingdom. Through lives of intentional faith that lead to action, may we make a difference. May we see and serve Christ in others *because we are Christians.*