Bias For The Bottom
Thirtieth Sunday In Ordinary Time 2016

Refection By: Deacon Paul Hursh

The Lord hears the cry of the poor. This is the Psalm (PS 34) response for this weekend’s Mass and it is good news for the poor, the marginalized, and the outsider, those without a voice in society. God is not distant or remote from those who suffer, rather the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament עִמָּנוּאֵל (Immanu'el) means “God is with us”. This is a consistent theme in our Jewish heritage as is evident in today’s reading from Sirach (Sir 35:12-18). The Hebrew word for the poor is anawim, which means those who are bowed down. This Catholic Worker image I have selected for this reflection is a stark reminder that the anawim are with us today in the homeless, but are we, as Christians, still for them as the body of Christ depicted in this image. Jesus, the Christ, could have come as any kind of person, rich or famous, a king or a beggar, the Temple High Priest or an outcast. Jesus chose to come as a poor child, born in a stable, who, along with his mother and father, became refugees fleeing to Egypt to avoid the wrath of a jealous King.

“And [as] Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man” (Luke 2:52) he chose to associate with many types of people, but he especially associated with the simple fishermen, the tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2: 13-17), prostitutes (Matthew 21: 31) and even the despised Samaritans (John 4: 4-26). The lesson in this for us today is; if Jesus chose to be for and with the poor and outcast, then shouldn’t we also be attentive to the cry of the poor, the sick, the outcast, and the dispossessed? This is a major challenge for me as I am sure it is for many in a world that seems to prize associating with the rich and powerful and the celebrity. One of the reasons I believe that I struggle with being present with those who are sick is, well… I am afraid that I might catch what they have. This seems to be a well-founded fear, and in this situation I need to take the appropriate precautions when visiting someone sick with a contagious disease. But if I let my fear overwhelm me to the point that it keeps me from visiting a sick friend, then I need to think more deeply about my fear and keep it in check. But why do I
hesitate to be present and supportive of all the other classes of anawim in the world? What am I afraid of?

I have reflected on my fear of getting involved with the lowly in recent days and I believe that it is similar to my aversion to be with those who are sick? I am afraid that I might “catch” what they have. Just as I am drawn to be with the rich and the powerful and the famous – perhaps because I subconsciously think that some of their wealth and notoriety will rub off on me. On the other hand, maybe I also think (subconsciously) that if I align myself with the poor and the outcast and the sinners, that I will also be rejected, just as they are. This, I believe, is also a well-founded fear.

To see the hazards of aligning with the anawim, one only needs to look at the life of Jesus and others like Him, who advocate for the underclass of society. There are repercussions for being a voice for the voiceless, by speaking truth to the powerful, and standing with the poor. A good example is Dom Hélder Pessoa Câmara (Brazilian Archbishop 1964-1985). He once said, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” Be further warned that the opposition for the one who does justice will go far beyond name-calling. Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Houses of Hospitality, was jailed many times for her position on poverty, peace, and justice. Archbishop Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi, are three individuals in modern times that were martyred for their advocacy and action on behalf of the poor and dispossessed.

So why should we risk our comforts, our liberty, even our very lives, on behalf of the sick, the poor, and dispossessed? The answer is simple and it is found in Matthew’s Gospel Chapter 25, versus 31-46. The reason is our very salvation. Just action and support of the poor and dispossessed is nothing less than an encounter with Jesus.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?’ And the king will say to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’

Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.’ Then they will answer and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?’ He will answer them, ‘Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.’ And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”