

Comment

One of the traditional christian practices of Lent designed to help us to rediscover and reappropriate the basics of our christian living is Almsgiving. And by Almsgiving we normally mean giving help to those suffering from some form of material lack or deprivation, and we may find ourselves invited to contribute money or kind to organisations like Oxfam, Cafod, the Simon and Cyrenian Communities, Shelter or the S.V.P.

Interestingly and illuminatingly, however, St Thomas Aquinas when discussing Almsgiving, (*S.T.* 11a. 11ae. q. 32), as well as listing what we used to call the corporal works of mercy – feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, burying the dead and so on – extends the list to include the appropriate almsgiving response to a whole range of spiritual deprivations and needs. The first deprivation on his list is ignorance, (as one of the most typical of Dominicans he shunned ‘ignorance is bliss’, believing that ‘the truth will set you free’), and includes in spiritual almsgiving, giving people good advice, fraternal correction of the sinner (not from moral priggishness but in order to free the person corrected), and putting up with people’s faults and weaknesses (quoting Galatians 6 ‘bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ’).

How Almsgiving can be given this breadth of meaning to embrace a whole range of attitudes of service to our brothers and sisters can be readily understood if the origin of ‘almsgiving’ is brooded upon. It comes from the Old English *aelmÿsse* which, through the Latin *eleemosina* derives from the Greek *eleemosyne* from *eleos*, mercy. And it is *eleos* which is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word describing a special and particular quality of God’s love for humanity, his *hesed*, which is translated ‘mercy’, but is to do with that utterly dependable, steadfast, long-suffering, patient love and compassion for humanity, especially in so far as we are weak, fallen and broken. God’s *hesed* shows itself typically in his loving concern for the poor, the weak, the wretched and despised. And one of the typical ways in which Israel broke the covenant relationship with God was precisely by failing to live and exhibit His *hesed* for the poor and the weak of their own society. It is one of the recurring themes of the Prophets; thus Isaiah 1: “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices,” says the Lord. “. . . bring no more vain offerings . . . even though you make many prayers I will not listen; your hands are full of blood . . . cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow” and so on.

It is, of course, God’s *hesed* to which Jesus is referring when he tells the pharisees in Matthew 12: 7, for example, “And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy not sacrifice’ you would not have condemned the guiltless”. And it is precisely

God's *hesed* that Jesus himself displays in his special devotion to the poor, the sick, the weak and the sinners.

Our word almsgiving, then, when unpacked, isn't simply referring to 'doing good', rather it is about a specific attitude and response towards a whole range of human need and human deprivation. An attitude and response which do not depend on the would-be recipient's worthiness or deserving, but simply because the need and deprivation are there, for it is an attitude and a response which is typical of none other than God Himself; his special love and compassion for the broken and the burdened. St Thomas treats almsgiving as part of the theological virtue of love, i.e. one of the ways in which God's love for us and His life in us (His grace) cashes itself in public flesh and blood terms. In other words, almsgiving – and this is why we think about it especially during Lent – is that basic feature of our christian living which is to do with our making incarnate in the world now that love and compassion which God typically has for the poor, the weak and the burdened, and which was archotypically incarnated in the life and death of Jesus, (Jesus not only lived for the broken, he died for them too).

One of the happier features of christian history is that God has regularly raised up men and women notable for being incarnations of His loving kindness for the broken and the weak. On the 24th of March we keep the second anniversary of the martyrdom of one such, Archbishop Oscar Romero, shot while celebrating Mass in a Cancer Hospital in El Salvador. Simply, he loved the poor and deprived of El Salvador and identified with them in their struggle for social justice and in their opposition to the barbarity of the security forces. We recommend to our readers a short commemorative book on Romero, published this month by C.I.I.R.,* including his last two sermons and an analysis of his life by Jon Sobrino S.J. who makes it quite clear that the political significance of Romero was a direct consequence of his profound faith in God, in Jesus, and his love and devotion to the poor and the weak. Small wonder that he was killed. Literally moments before he was shot, he said, speaking of the Eucharist in his final homily:

This holy Mass, this Eucharist, is clearly an act of faith. Our christian faith shows us that in this moment contention is changed into the body of the Lord who offers himself for the redemption of the world. In the chalice, wine is transformed into the blood that was the price of salvation. May this body broken and this blood shed for human beings encourage us to give our body and blood up to suffering and pain, as Christ did – not for self, but to bring justice and peace to our people.

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* *Romero Martyr for Liberation*. £1.50. Available from C.I.I.R.
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