

Homily for Palm Sunday

March 24-25, 2018

Readings: Isaiah 50: 4-7; Philippians 2: 6-11; Mark 14: 1-15:47

Preacher: Sr. M. Gratia L'Esperance, RSM

“Love Your Neighbor' Wasn't Just a Suggestion”

(blog by Jim Wallis of Sojourners, 09-27-2012)

Some people use Jesus' saying, “The poor you will always have with you ...” as a convenient excuse for being indifferent, for ignoring them, and for doing nothing—either in our individual lives or in our public policy.

This saying is found in three of the four Gospel accounts that tell of a woman anointing Jesus, which he notes as preparation for his burial. Mark's Gospel today adds a significant point, seldom quoted: “The poor you will always have with you, *and you can help them any time you want.* But you will not always have me.”

This additional proposition is often overlooked by people who take poverty as an inevitable fact. On the contrary, poverty is an urgent reminder of what we have left undone. As Nelson Mandela has said: “Like slavery, like apartheid, *poverty* is not *natural*. It is *man made* and it can be overcome by the actions of human beings.” It results from our decisions about public policy and social structures.

Almsgiving is one of the five “pillars” of Islamic tradition. The Hebrew prophets and Jesus were not complacent about poverty, either. One of the most touching passages is that in Exodus, where God says to Moses:

“I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them ...”

And so God tells Moses to go do something about it.

And Moses is overwhelmed. “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt?” Each of us might want to say, “Who am I, that I should go and speak to my legislators or to my faith community leaders about people who are suffering? Who am I to organize people to do something concrete about this?”

In Luke's Gospel, when Jesus goes according to his custom into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, he is invited by the synagogue leader to read from the prophet Isaiah:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners,
and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

By the way, the "year of God's favor" or Jubilee Year was an ideal of debt forgiveness and restoration of land titles to those who had suffered misfortune since the last celebration—in other words, restoring social justice. Isaiah's passage sums up the mission of Jesus, which he passed on to us.

In contrast to the words of Isaiah and Jesus, people who are poor often receive, not good news, but bad—expensive car repairs, foreclosure, job loss, serious illness, death of a loved one, a homicide of someone they know.

These realities persist not just for a day but are constant attendants in these people's lives, when they wake up in the morning and when they go to bed at night. We who are comfortable often have no clue about the struggles that people who are poor face every day.

God answers prayer, but depends on us, like Moses, to carry the message! We are the ordinary means God uses to respond to the cry of the poor for immediate assistance and for solutions to long-term social problems such as increasing poverty. Ask yourself, "Have I volunteered my time lately?" (Most of you certainly have.) "Have I ever contacted the current Pharaohs—our elected local, state, and federal officials—about an issue?" Please note that a record of every contact is kept and is considered to represent 100 other people who did not do so. The local League of Women Voters puts out an annual listing of "Who Represents You." You can find a copy online.

For several years now, Rochester organizations have focused on poverty: the Rochester / Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative; Acts Rochester; RochesterACTS; and multiple agencies and services such as Action for a Better Community.

So—we can pray, make phone calls or send letters or emails, volunteer, join active groups, donate funds. Make our voices heard!