

Ash Wednesday

March 1, 2017

Give Alms!

[RCL - Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103 or 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21]

On this day, may we consider together just what sort of gift we ask for when we pray in the Collect for "new and contrite hearts." Just what sort of hearts does God want us to have? In the name of this God: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The poet Robert Bridges was experiencing difficulties in matters of faith. He read many books of theology. He spent hours in reflection. Yet he found himself unable to believe in God. Bridges wrote to another poet, his friend Gerald Manley Hopkins, asking for advice. Hopkins wrote back this terse reply: "Give alms."

Give alms. In other words, Robert Bridges, don't sit there alone with your doubts and your theology books. Reach into your pocket, pull out your wallet, and give away your money, your precious money, so that the hungry can be fed and the homeless housed, so that the ignorant can learn and the sick be helped back to health. If you have trouble believing in God, then don't stew in your own thoughts, but act as though you already believe. Give alms, and the little you lose will be far exceeded by what you gain.

Gerald Manley Hopkins' advice to his friend must have done some good. Bridges became ardent in his faith.

The advice was on target, not only for Robert Bridges, but also for us. The call to give alms is rooted in the Gospel, in the gospel for Ash Wednesday that we heard moments ago. There Jesus speaks about three of the central religious practices familiar to those around him: prayer, fasting, and the giving of alms. He wants these practices to be done in the right spirit, but there is never any question whether they should be done. Jesus does not say: "If you give alms." What he says is: "When you give alms."

Gathered here in worship on the opening day of Lent, we may wonder about prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, as well as other practices appropriate to this season. What good are they? They point to the insistent need we have to put our faith to work, and not let it be a head trip or an emotional indulgence.

Almsgiving is of undeniable importance in this regard. Which do we love more: God or money? Are we making our own the priorities of the kingdom, or are we bending to some other standard? Through the alms we give, we pay homage to Christ present where he told us he would be: in the person of the poor, the hungry, the sick.

Yet something else also happens. No matter how generous our giving, we soon recognize that the need far outreaches our resources. Our giving does not make wants disappear. Instead, as we give we recognize how serious and indeed inexhaustible are the needs that our alms address.

So then, alms release us from a poisonous focus on ourselves, and they do so in two ways. We come to recognize the need of our sisters and brothers, people made in God's image, people for whom Christ died. At the same time, we are humbled because we realize that what we can do is but little.

When alms are given in the right spirit, we do not believe we gain any merit with God. Instead, we recognize how, in the face of human need, we are poor yet privileged. Poor, because we are equipped to do only a little. Privileged, because though it's little, we can do something.

The importance of almsgiving is emphasized in early Christian literature. Listen to John Chrysostom, a pre-eminent preacher of the ancient Church. In his "Homily 50 on Matthew" he declares:

"Of what use is it to weigh down Christ's table with golden cups, when he himself is dying of hunger? First, fill him when he is hungry; then use the means you have left to adorn his table. Will you have a golden cup made but not give a cup of water? What is the use of providing the table with cloths woven of gold thread, and not providing Christ himself with the clothes he needs? What profit is there in that?"

"Tell me: if you were to see Christ lacking the necessary food but were to leave him in that state and merely surround his table with gold, would he be grateful to you or would he not be angry? What if you were to see people clad in worn-out rags and stiff with cold, and were to forget about clothing them and instead were to set up golden columns for them, saying that you were doing it in their honor? Would they not think they were being mocked and greatly insulted?"

In a single phrase this great father of the Church sums up his message: "God does not want golden vessels but golden hearts."

Here and now our temptation is not what tempted Chrysostom's congregation. We are not likely to go overboard in adorning altars and churches. Our characteristic mistake may be spending on our luxuries what might otherwise be given so that others can survive.

But the point remains the same: God wants golden hearts, hearts willing to give alms, to show faith in action, to give not only of their wealth, but of their talent and their time so that others may have a life worthy of the name.

My friends, this Lent and every Lent, the saints of past centuries and indeed our Lord Jesus himself call us to the practice of giving alms. In this we demonstrate our family resemblance to God our father and Jesus our brother, for what is revealed in Lent and Holy Week and Easter, but the self-emptying of God so that we may have life? The cross is the divine almsgiving so that we, poor in our sins and our mortality, may enjoy abundant life. We, in our turn, can also give generously.

This year, during this opportunity that will never return, may we all live a holy Lent marked by generous almsgiving. The point is not to gain God's favor. Instead, we are to act on our faith, or even act on our desire to have faith. We are to give generously so that others may live. We are to give freely so that, through our poor efforts, they may experience something of God's immense love.

I have spoken these words to you in the name of the God who knows we are dust, yet still believes we can have hearts of gold, hearts like God's own: the One known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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