

Along the track

The Face of a Pickled Pepper

When Nelson Mandela died last year, all forms of media flooded us with memories of his life and its impact. And rightly so. He was a remarkable man. I was struck by one quote... well, more than one but this particular gem almost leapt off the page:

No-one is born hating another person, because of the colour of his skin or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate and if they can learn to hate they can be taught to love for love comes more naturally to the human heart than it's opposite.
Nelson Mandela.

Hating is an acquired skill – we have to work at it. We learn it from others, we learn it from experiencing disappointments, injustice at the hands of others or just from an attitude that ‘the world owes us a living’. We learn to hate by making people different, making them not ‘one of us’ instead of seeking common ground. Mandela will be remembered for his ability to forgive, for his generosity of spirit despite the injustices he suffered. That takes extraordinary courage and big-heartedness, if there is such a word. He had the chance to do the opposite when he came to power but he chose to forgive those who had taken so much away from him, those who had deprived him of liberty and so many of the things you and I take for granted every day. There is a pettiness about hatred, it means looking inwards, it is about feeling superior others.

Pope Francis reminds us often that being a Christian means that we are called to embody God’s graciousness, not just by talking about it but God’s graciousness demands that it be demonstrated in word and action. Isn’t that a wonderful expression, ‘graciousness’. Jesus told many stories about it – the parable of the prodigal son, the parable of the talents, the parable of the generous landowner, for example. Jesus embodied that graciousness in his generosity towards others, his desire to forgive, to heal, to enable people to live life to the full by overcoming injustice, unfairness and by showing us how to interact with others. And by his genuine interest in others.

We are called to put flesh on God’s love and forgiveness, compassion and mercy. That’s what baptism is all about. It means caring, yes, but it also means offering hospitality – being open to people, especially those in need whether that be for material needs or those who need encouragement, those who need emotional support in the hard times of life or those who just need to believe that someone cares about what they are trying to do or about what they are thinking. Joyce Rupp has a prayer that sums that up well: *We are grateful for the messengers of God – people, events, written or spoken words – that came to us at just the right time and helped us to grow. Are we such messengers?*

Pope Francis calls on us to learn to be magnanimous, to be ‘big-hearted’. Such an attitude is the opposite of hate. He defines magnanimous as ‘having a big heart, having a greatness of soul. It means having hope and optimism, seeing the beauty and goodness of creation and of humanity, which always retains the Creator’s imprint. But above all witness with your lives what you are communicating’.

So, if we are to help others to be magnanimous, we have to be magnanimous in our own minds and hearts and actions. Greatness of soul involves caring for others of course but it also requires hospitality, not just opening our doors but it also means an openness to ideas, to using imagination, to wondering, and questioning because that too is part of seeing the unfolding beauty and goodness of God’s creation which continues to reveal itself day by day, year by year. Just think back at what has been discovered in recent years – in space probes, in scientific research, in historical research or just by opening our own back doors and going out and having a look!! Having faith does not mean we close our minds but it invites us to continue to puzzle over problems, to pursue and deepen our knowledge, to stand in awe before the inexplicable and to contemplate the unfolding truth that is God’s gift to us. Our witness is about having and imparting vitality, he says. It is no surprise then, that Pope Francis says that “The Christian is a man or woman of joy.” Using a phrase that translates literally as “the face of a pickled pepper,” Pope Francis said that when Christians have more of a sourpuss than a face that communicates the joy of being loved by God, they harm the witness of the church*.

“Joy is a gift from the Lord. It fills us from the inside and naturally leads to generosity,” the Pope said and “such a joy cannot be bottled up so we can keep it to ourselves. If we want this joy just for ourselves, in the end it will make us sick and our hearts will shrivel up and our faces will not transmit that great joy, but nostalgia, that melancholy that isn’t healthy.”

As Mandela said, love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. It is part of the vitality Pope Francis speaks about – it is part of Jesus’ message that ‘I have come so that you may have life’. Vitality involves giving and receiving – being open to the messengers of God in whatever form they take. They often come from people and in places we least expect, but only if we are open to them, and to an ever increasing understanding of God and appreciation of God’s wonderful and mysterious ways.

*Homily Domus Sanctae Marthae 10.5.2013.

Regards
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