

Sunday Homily

SECOND SUNDAY BEFORE LENT

20 FEBRUARY 2022

YEAR C

“For the measure you give will be the
measure you get back.”

Luke 6:38

Illustration

The words “spiritual” and “spirituality” are very popular nowadays. People often claim that, while they are not religious, they are spiritual. The National Health Service recognises a “spiritual” dimension in the process of health care and patient recovery. Bookshops have sections on “Mind, Body and Spirit”, where books on crystals, myths, angels and meditation all rub shoulders together amicably.

So “spirituality” becomes another lifestyle choice. We can try different ones according to our mood. “Spiritualities” do not demand commitment or make tedious moral claims on our lives.

Gospel Teaching

In that sense, Christianity is not a “spiritual” religion, as today’s Gospel reading makes plain. This is part of Luke’s equivalent of Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount”, and it is interesting to compare the two. At every point, Luke’s version is more concrete, more demanding, less spiritualised, if that were possible.

Where Matthew’s Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” Luke spells it out to make it absolutely clear that this “love” is not a feeling, not a spiritualised, internalised approach to others; it is about what you do, and, in particular, what you do with your money and your possessions.

Luke’s audience is used to a system of mutual benefits. If you lend somebody something, they are in your debt, and the debt must be repaid, in some way or another. But Luke says that we have a choice: we can go on belonging to the “I scratch your back and you scratch mine” system, or we join God’s system, instead. God gets nothing from us, and yet he cares for all.

This leads, in Luke, into a brief discourse about forgiveness and its benefits. St Augustine of Hippo said that forgiveness ought to be one of the most characteristic things about Christians: we know that we have been forgiven and so we forgive. We know that we are constantly in need of new forgiveness, and so we know that our neighbours will be, too. This is the theme of the family prayer of all Christians, the prayer we call “the Lord’s Prayer”, which Jesus himself gave us:

“forgive us our sins as we forgive others”. It is a theme that certainly derives from Jesus himself, recurring in several parables, as well as in teaching like this.

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive others”, “for the measure you give will be the measure you get back”. We have here a picture of superabundance: pouring down in a steady stream into somebody’s lap until they are almost buried in it. It is a joyful picture of generosity. But we tend to forget that what is to be poured into our laps is of the same kind as we have given to others. It’s our choice whether it will be good things or bad, because it will reflect our own actions.

In Acts, Luke gives us the idyllic picture of the earliest Church in which possessions were held in common, and where rich and poor were all equally fed and cared for. Luke’s first readers were not at liberty to think that Christianity was a “spiritual” religion. They needed to know that, if they joined this movement, it would make radical demands upon them, and change their whole understanding of how the world should run. God’s mutual benefits system works very differently from the human one we have set up.

Application

It is extraordinary how we have managed to ignore so much of Jesus’ teaching and turn our discipleship into another lifestyle choice which doesn’t make too many demands upon us.

Few of us are called to follow St Francis who, when he heard Jesus’ words to the rich young ruler read out in church, took them literally, and went and sold all that he had and gave it to the poor. But most of us are probably called to take the Gospel a little more literally than we do.

But this is not an attempt to send us all away depressed and guilty, because Luke’s picture is a joyful one. It concentrates on what we get back through following Jesus’ teaching: every time we give something, share something, try to treat our enemies with love, we know that that is what we will get back from God. And not just in some distant and spiritualised future, but now. Giving and forgiving are wonderfully releasing, vital actions. Let’s all try them, today and every day.