

Sermon

Sunday 16 November 2014

Lessons 1 Thessalonians 5: 1 – 11

St Matthew 25: 14 – 30

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Holy God, be present to us in all our meditations. May we listen with the heart for the movement of Your Spirit already within us. Amen.

In August this year, Bridget Jones author, Helen Fielding, went to Texas, to the Rio Grande, to the river which separates the United States from Mexico. Fielding was there at the invitation of the charity, Save the Children. Over the past few months, so much media attention has been focused on Gaza, Syria and Isis while the overflowing border control centres in the City of McAllen, southern Texas, have gone unobserved.

The river is 200 metres across and separates two completely different worlds. Writing in August, Fielding said that a few weeks earlier there had been 29 Border Patrol Officers, but now there was more than 200. The problem is not drugs or adults, but children: tens of thousands of them appearing from Central America on the river bank. They are fleeing gang violence in El Salvador, Honduras

and Guatemala. More than 66,000 unaccompanied children have appeared in the past year on the southwest border alone.

Fielding spoke to Sister Norma, who organises the Roman Catholic charities in the area. She was also overwhelmed by the residents of McAllen who have rallied to offer informal help, such as providing food and nappies. While Fielding was interviewing Sister Norma, a new group of mothers and small children arrived. As they entered the hall of the church, someone started clapping and the whole room joined in. Sister Norma said, 'They've gone on a horrible journey. For many of them, it's the first time they've experienced a welcome.' Many of them have tragic, painful stories to tell.

The City of McAllen has set up tents, showers, medical help and legal support for those who make it. Support is offered to help mothers and children qualify as asylum seekers rather than illegal immigrants. At the centres, Save the Children provide cots, baby supplies and an opportunity for the children to play. The team leader said, 'Whether it's Syria, Iraq, Gaza or Texas, our research has shown that what really helps children recovering from traumatic events is simply a safe place where they can play.'

Sister Norma told the story of a telephone call she received from a Border Patrol Officer. He said that he had found a five-year-old and two three year old children alone. He said, 'Sister, I need you to come and help them.' She said she could hear the children screaming in the background. The officer then said, 'Actually, I need you to come and help me.' Save the Children has been critical of the US administration saying that this is a humanitarian crisis: these are children, not prisoners and should not be treated as such. On leaving the US, Fielding was questioned by a Border Patrol Officer while she looked for her visa. He asked her what she was doing in McAllen. She told him. 'Yup', he said. 'When I was working on the river, we were finding 250 children a day.' 'It must have been hard for you,' she said. 'Do you have kids?' 'Yes,' he said quietly, 'I have children too.'

There are many heart-breaking stories from around the world, around Britain, Scotland and this city. At times, such stories can seem totally overwhelming, depressing and a cause of despair. Yet, there in the middle of that tragedy in Central America and the US State of Texas is Save the Children and a number of Roman Catholic

charities and churches working together with the City to help people, many of whom are children. It is simply not possible to miraculously change the nature of the world; in this case, to stop overnight the gang violence, oppression and injustice in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Yet in the middle of that tragedy, there is hope. Pope Francis says, 'Poverty calls us to sow hope. Poverty is the flesh of the poor Jesus, in that child who is hungry, in the one who is sick, in those unjust social structures.....Among our tasks as witnesses to the love of Christ is that of giving a voice to the cry of the poor.'

In our Gospel lesson this morning, the Parable of the Talents, we are drawn into a complex story. A harsh and unscrupulous property owner trusts his slaves to make him money while he is away. On his return, two of them have done so successfully, while the third made him no money and returns the original sum. He says to his master, 'You are a harsh man, reaping what you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.' This third slave is punished. Jesus said, 'For to all those who have, more will be given....but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.' This is a complex parable and its meaning is not immediately obvious.

Some have focused on the word 'talents' saying that we are to share our talents. That's an erroneous interpretation, not that sharing talents is a bad thing; it's just that this is not the central meaning of this story. Some scholars suggest that the harsh property owner lives off the interest he charges on money he lends. In ancient times, charging interest as a means of making a living was deemed immoral, unjust and corrupt. Some have said that the first two so-called successful slaves have colluded in this economic oppression, while the third has made a stand.

The Pope said, 'Poverty call us to sow hope. Poverty is the flesh of the poor Jesus...' In that statement, what has he done? He has drawn the issue of material and perhaps spiritual poverty into the heart of God. In the face of the asylum seeker, he calls us to see with the heart, to see the face of the broken Jesus, to see the distressed child as bearers of the divine image, the divine essence, and that each one of us is the most precious thing in all this glorious universe. We are called to engage with one another not as numbers but as whole people, living God-bearers.

The Pope has done one more thing and I believe this is the point of the parable. Always, Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God, the dominion of God, God's reign and realm. Imagine that realm as a beautiful fragrance changing the world. This parable, in context, says that we have a choice in how we live. Either we live according to Pharaoh, Rome or the values of this material world, or we can live as children of our Father in heaven. In life, we have to make compromises but that complexity is perhaps reflected in the complexity of the parable. The psalmist said, 'The earth is the LORD's, and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.'

In life, it is right that we provide for ourselves and those whom we love, but we are called to overcome our ego, that inner demon, that selfishness which deludes us that we need more than we do. We are the slave who makes a stand, but we are also the harsh property owner. In First Thessalonians, St Paul said, 'Put on the breastplate of faith and love...'. In his Inaugural Homily, Francis said:

I would like to ask all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political and social life, and all men and women of goodwill: let us be 'protectors' of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment.

A few weeks ago, I led a retreat in Perth for members of the Diaconate in the Church of Scotland. In one of the exercises, each of us brought a story to the group which had touched and changed us, a story which we would then, together and separately bring before God. In prayer, I lifted up the story of the children of Central America. I believe that spirituality and spiritual practice sensitises us to the spirit and pain of others. Our ego is the biggest barrier to compassion. In the world, with so much suffering, it is easy to begin to doubt and retreat in a negative sense. The Burmese leader, Aung Suu Kyi, often quotes the story of Václav Havel, the leader of the nonviolent revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989. Havel said, 'I stopped waiting for the world to improve and exercised my right to intervene in that world.'

If we breath in, each of us can let the fragrance of God fill, change and renew us.

Amen.