

Sermon preached at 10.00 am Sung Eucharist

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sunday 26 May 2019

Begging is the last refuge of the destitute. The man lying by the pool next to the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem, could scarcely have sunk much lower. His must have been a life of hunger and boredom with no realistic prospect of healing. He may well have felt hopeless and helpless and wished for death. Malnourished, and having been there for many years, he had become part of the scenery. He would have been ignored by most of those who passed by; shunned as a source of possible contamination, and according to the attitudes of his day, which often equated sickness and misfortune with past sins, seen an object of judgement.

Broadcasters spare us the worst horrors, but what we see on television must make us realise that the power of darkness is undiminished. Many people, especially across the developing world, endure horrific circumstances in countries that are systemically poor. Christian Aid Week, just past, featured Sierra Leone, where young women have a greater chance of dying in childbirth than completing secondary education, because of non-existent maternity services. The government has no money to develop them, being hamstrung by having to pay off IMF loans they needed to contain the Ebola epidemic, which if it had got out of control, could have killed millions

across the world. The economies of other countries have been destroyed by natural disaster, or by corrupt and tyrannical regimes. In many places, wars that the world powers either seem powerless to stop or which they keep smouldering for their own ends, have destroyed the economy. However, many of those caught up in these horrors, though sometimes helpless, are not hopeless. Their resilience, in the face of circumstances that would bring most of us to our knees, should humble us. When their outward conditions improve, many people will bounce back, but some will still be left forced to beg, dependent like that man by the Sheep Gate, on the often-grudging goodwill of others.

In Britain, society has often seen those who beg as a problem, a threat and a source of crime. Down the centuries, beggars have been whipped in the stocks, driven out of town, imprisoned or confined in workhouses. Although, since the coming of the National Assistance Acts of 1948, those who beg are now treated more humanely, we have only to walk through the town centre to realise that even in affluent Bury St Edmunds, begging still exists. Amongst those we see sitting in the alleyways by the market place or in shop doorways, twenty also regularly sleep rough. Many of those who beg have poor mental health, often made worse by dependency on drink or drugs. Some of them go in and out of prison and their life expectancy is about thirty years less than the average for the population as a whole.

When faced with someone who asks for money, we (and I really mean 'I') are advised to refuse, as we know that it may well be spent on drugs and therefore end up in the black economy, which fuels so much of the world's misery. This can make us/me feel like those people who walked by and ignored the lame man begging by the pool. They did so because there was nothing they could do to help. We/I wish that those who accost us/me were not there, and can metaphorically 'pass by on the other side', trying to avoid eye contact or speaking to them. To feel powerless is to feel out of control, which threatens our self-esteem. Those who make us feel helpless can also make us feel guilty, and that guilt can turn to anger. It is easy to dismiss these unfortunates as being the authors of their own misfortune, who should 'pull up their socks' and sort out their lives. True, many of them may have made serious mistakes, but punishment does not work; prison is said to be as likely to create new addicts as to cure established ones. Effective therapy is in short supply and many of those dependent on drugs have led lives that started from a low base and have never had the chances given to most of us.

Those whom life has seemingly defeated often not only expose our own impotence to help them, but hold up a mirror to own lives and to our deepest fears. Their apparently desperate and meaningless lives are the tip of an iceberg of quiet desperation which afflicts so much of Western society, where the last few years have left many on the

poverty line or just managing to keep their heads above water. Amongst the materially affluent, Christian values are often derided and people have been left with a bewildering cocktail of life choices, leaving them morally confused and sometimes mentally and spiritually damaged. Being surrounded by desperation can also make us question whether there is any real meaning to our own lives. We are sometimes no longer sure of our place in the great scheme of things.

Religion doesn't always get a good press. Many people are utterly indifferent. Others regard religion as mumbo-jumbo, as an instrument of coercion and abuse, or at best a weird interest for those who like such things. People may say they are spiritual, but not religious, but humans are embodied spirits; spirituality must be grounded in action; without action, it can be self-centred escapism. The purpose of religion is to translate heavenly mindedness into earthly good.

For Christians this happens because, in Jesus, God took on our humanity. In the Eucharist, we thank God for this, for what God has done and will do for us. As members of the church-Christ's Body, we are also the inheritors of generations who have followed Christ; have been changed and in turn have changed the world. The man by the pool was hopeless and helpless, until Jesus came across him. Jesus did not pass by; he did not see the man either as a sinner, getting his just deserts or as a social problem. Instead of ignoring the man, Jesus

spoke to him, and in asking him whether he wanted to be made well, gave him hope. Here at last was someone who might be prepared to help, so that when Jesus said 'Stand up, take up your mat and walk', he no longer felt helpless and had the courage to take the first step. Taking that first step is all-important. Of course, we worry that we may get kindness thrown back in our faces. None of us like going against social convention as Jesus did when he healed the man by the pool on the Sabbath or as Lydia did when she invited a strange man, Paul, to her house, and he accepted. If we fall flat on our face and make things worse, we are in good company. The apostles-Jesus' chosen companions-were at the start, anything but super heroes. One of them betrayed Jesus and the rest ran away. After the Resurrection, Jesus forgave them; only then could they go forward and achieve things that a few years earlier were beyond the wildest stretch of their imaginations. Because we too can feel hopeless and helpless, it is therefore no accident that before anything else happens in the Eucharist, we confess our sins, to be told once again 'Stand up, pick up your mat and walk'. We then receive Christ's grace in the outward forms of bread and wine so that we in turn may be visible signs of God's gracious love to one another and to all we meet.

We are fortunate to live when do; cures that people in Jesus' time hailed as miracles are now widely available. Today, surgery would probably have the man and his fellow sufferers by the pool back on

their feet. Whatever the rationalists and atheists may say, our society is underpinned by Christian values, and belief in one God translates into belief in a coherent universe, without which science and all the benefits it brings would not have developed.

Soon we shall be sent out to love and serve Our Lord. We believe that we are children of a loving and generous God, but the prevailing mood in this country, where so many apparently feel angry and defrauded, can challenge our faith and unnerve us. The task that seems impossible can often deflect us from doing those things that we can. Miracles, in the popular sense of a quick fix, rarely happen. Most problems are too complex. Many of those better qualified and more-saintly than us continue to struggle. Even if we can't take away the pain of the world at a stroke, we can however select and focus on something and help with our prayers and our funds. We may even find gifts that we had not thought we possessed. Hudson Taylor, who founded the China Inland Mission, put it this way s, 'I have found that there are three stages in every work of God: first it is impossible, then it is difficult, then it is done'.

*James Knowles*