

27th Sunday (C)

- In preparing funerals with families I am often moved deeply by the ways families, & especially partners have cared for their loved ones, sometimes for many years, in their declining health.
- Often they have given up their employment to be full-time carers, & have sacrificed everything simply to attend to their care.
- Then they experience a terrible loss when their loved one dies because it leaves a massive void in their lives, not just because they have departed from this life, but they have got used to expending so much of their time, energy & emotions into their care, & though it has cost them so much of themselves, they would have done nothing else – their care has been the expression of their love for them.
- And when I have visited them prior to their dying, to anoint them & give them communion, I have often witnessed the loving gaze these carers have for their dying loved ones & been moved by their selfless care.
- There is no way they would go around shouting: 'Look at me! I cared for my husband, or my wife, or my child, or my parent. Reward me!, as if they were looking for a pat on their backs.
- Instead, they would all say that they did what they did as their duty or responsibility for the one they loved.
- That was Jesus' way of thinking about our doing 'good works'.
- They are the ways we are obliged to act towards other human beings.
- At the end we can only say, like the servants in the little story: 'we have done no more than our duty'.
- There is no special 'reward' for doing what we know we should do anyway.
- How do we discover what is our duty towards others?
- Jesus is really saying: 'Perceive human beings correctly, perceive your relationship to them, & certain obligations or duties follow.'
- How *do* we perceive other human beings?
- In one of the most poetic passages in any of his writings, the late Pope John Paul II describes a human being in striking terms '*.. although formed from the dust of the earth, [a human being is] a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory.*' (*Evangelium Vitae*, 34.2)
- Imagine if you & I actually saw a human being, every human being in that way, that perception would lead to ways of relating which were obliging of us to care for them – imagine if everyone who believed in a loving God who created everyone & everything in his image, would appreciate this obligation.
- We would be duty bound to ensure that such a creature – dust of the earth, a trace of God's glory – is not allowed to starve, receives medical care, is offered humane companionship which allows the person to develop, is

enabled to grow & flourish, & generally is given the opportunity to live with dignity & freedom – something so much of the world's population is denied today.

- Certainly we would be obliged to refrain from violence towards, or manipulation of, such a creature.
- If, as a basic minimum, without any sense of Christian motives, people could treat every person as a human being worthy of dignity simply because they are human – what a different world it would be.
- And then, just when we think we deserve a special congratulatory reward from God, we hear Jesus say: 'You have only done your duty. You have no claim on the Creator. You have not earned some heavenly reward which *must* be paid.'
- Nevertheless, in doing that sort of duty you & I are becoming the sort of creatures who can love unreservedly.
- To serve God in the world, to love his creation, in response to his invitation, is a privilege.
- We share in his creativity, compassion, hospitality and care, & often, through us, others come to know God and judge if Christian faith is sincere.
- As respondents to many surveys tell us, they may like who Jesus is and his teaching in the Gospel, but the stumbling block for their joining us, or even remaining with us, is the way they see that faith not authentically lived out by members, & even official representatives of the Church.
- Many of us, however, struggle on heroically to serve God as best we can.
- Our faith gives purpose and meaning to our work in the world.
- As difficult as it can be to love others and live peacefully, we know this is God's desire and intention for the world.
- Every act of kindness that we perform extends God's kingdom, nothing is too small, nothing is insignificant.
- If all of us lived out Christian teaching, the world would be transformed.
- It is not that our virtues and values have been found wanting, it's more that they are not fully tried out.
- We are called to develop the capacity, the skill to love unreservedly - & we can have this capacity because we are in God's image.
- Then, at the moment of death, as a matter of sheer grace, we will be invited to go on loving unreservedly, but this time loving the whole of creation & its Creator without any limits. And that is Heaven!
- In the meantime, here on Earth God directs His loving gaze on each one of us, just as the carer gazes on the dying loved one.
- That gaze encourages us to develop that capacity to love others unreservedly & in that way we participate in God's project for creation.