

Monday 27 February 2023

First responders

Readings: Leviticus 19:1-2. 11-18; Matthew 25:31-46



*"I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink."
(Matthew 25:35)*

First responders to a major incident know that their top priority is not those who are begging for help and support, but the silent victims who are possibly too badly hurt to express their urgent need.

A similar thing happens in famine-stricken areas of the world. At first, people demand food and drink. Gradually, they lose even the strength to stand. They sit or lie in silence, waiting to see if they are noticed and helped before it is too late. The silence of real hunger is unnerving and speaks volumes about needs which might exceed the available supplies. The utter helplessness of the starving and thirsty people can generate feelings of uselessness in their would-be helpers, who recognise their limitations before the desperation that is so hard to heal. Many first responders have thought, "There's only me and I can do so little. I'm only a drop in the ocean." Yet an ocean only exists because of countless tiny drops of water.

Often, it's the people who don't make a fuss whose difficulties are the deepest and most painful. They are the overlooked and ignored "little ones" whose whisper is silenced by the money, influence and status of those who refuse to hear their cries for help. Today's Gospel is that of the first responders: people who see the need and try to help, even if their best efforts seem inadequate. Jesus asks us to become first responders, who see what is wanted and offer our services.

Prayer

Loving Lord, teach me to be a first responder. Let me be alert to the silent cries of the people in my life who are in the greatest need, and let me respond in love. Amen.

Tuesday 28 February 2023

Daily bread

Readings: Isaiah 55:10-11; Matthew 6:7-15



“Give us today our daily bread.” (Matthew 6:11)

Did Marie Antoinette truly declare, “Let them eat cake”, when she heard of the starvation of the people of France? There is no evidence that she ever did. But it’s believed that, instead of distributing the flour stored in their luxurious palaces, she and others of wealth and influence used it to powder and whiten their extravagant wigs.

St Leonard of Port Maurice, a medieval Franciscan who helped popularise the Stations of the Cross, said that a good way to fast is to eat whatever food we might like – but to eat a smaller portion than we want. Then we really miss that extra mouthful. But what if there is no choice?

An Auschwitz survivor said that the inmates were kept so hungry that prisoners could be very cruel to each other in the fight for that extra mouthful of soup or potato.

Jesus taught us the Our Father, where we pray for our daily bread – but it’s not just for the food to appear on our plate. We need more than bread. We need food for the soul, something to help us to climb out of bed in the morning and make it through the day. The real hunger is when someone feels that life is meaningless. When we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread”, we’re asking for food, but we’re also asking for the grace to fully appreciate God’s amazing gift of life.

Prayer

Lord God, give us today our daily bread. Let us have enough to eat but also a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Thank you for your gift of life. Amen.

Wednesday 1 March 2023

Lent is a way of loving

Readings: Jonah 3:1-10; Luke 11:29-32



*“For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation.”
(Luke 11:30)*

The Old Testament story of Jonah tells us that the reluctant prophet was swallowed by a big fish, stayed alive in its stomach for three days and was then vomited alive and well, and able to continue his prophetic mission. It's a memorable story, but physically surely impossible. Jesus and his followers lived in a story-telling society. Jonah tried to escape from God and couldn't. When told to go to Nineveh, he travelled as far as possible in the opposite direction. The story of Jonah and the fish was a way of telling people that it's not worth trying to get away from God, because God can always bring someone back to what they were supposed to be doing in the first place.

Jonah challenged the Ninevites to mend their ways or face disaster. They listened, changed their behaviour and, much to Jonah's disgust, avoided the catastrophe he had foretold. In today's Gospel, Jesus promises his audience that, like the Ninevites, they will also find compassion, love and forgiveness if they repent of their wrongdoing and turn towards God. If Jonah was a sign of God's love, so was Jesus an even greater sign to his audience and to future generations. All they needed to do was to listen.

That's what Lent is all about: returning to God, listening to a promise of more love and peace than we can possibly imagine and, in receiving love, sharing it with others. Love grows in being given away. Lent is a way of loving.

Prayer

Loving Lord, please don't let me wander away from you. Bring me closer to you. Fill me with your love and show me how to share it with others. Amen.

Thursday 2 March 2023

God's response

Readings: Esther 4:17; Matthew 7:7-12



*“Is there a man among you who would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread?”
(Matthew 7:9)*

Have you ever noticed that adults automatically adjust their way of speaking to a very small child? People use very short sentences, words of one or two syllables and terms such as “doggie”, which they wouldn’t use with another adult. Whether or not someone has much experience of children – their own or other people’s – grown-ups were all once little ones expecting to be treated with kindness, understanding and insight.

Jesus knew that, which is why he could confidently tell his audience that a child who asked for bread wouldn’t be handed a stone. It was a good way of telling people just how much his Father loves us and knows our needs even before we start pestering him.

Do we sometimes treat God as a sort of customer service line, which we only call when we want someone to sort out problems? We’ve all had the experience of phoning a company only to be put on hold, listening to looped music, which is regularly interrupted by messages saying something like, “We greatly value your custom. Thank you for your patience. You are in a queue.” God doesn’t do that. Even when the response to a prayer – spoken or unspoken – seems to be delayed, there are moments when we know that we’ve been heard and only need to practise some patience. But patience is hard, isn’t it? How often do we remember to thank our amazing God for responding to our needs?

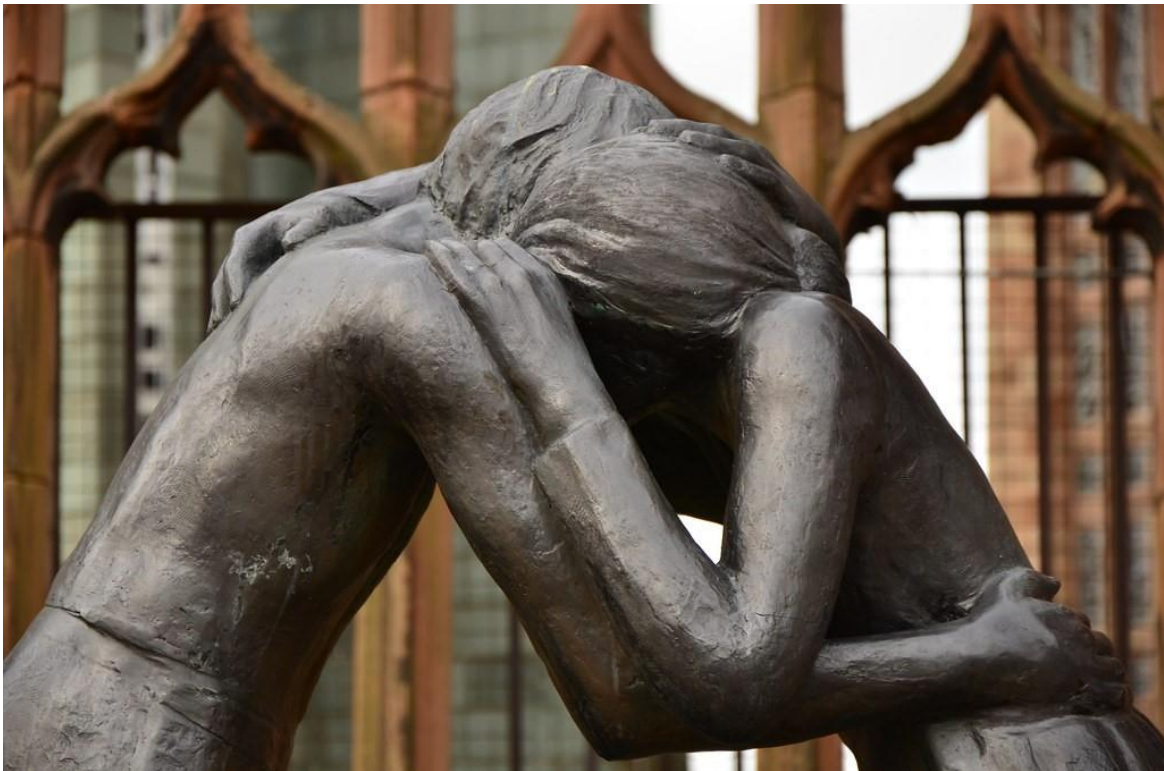
Prayer

Loving Lord, thank you for listening to me and being there for me in good times and in bad. Teach me to trust you and teach me patience if I start to look for instant answers. Amen.

Friday 3 March 2023

Not thoughtless, but thoughtful

Readings: Ezekiel 18:21-28; Matthew 5:20-26



*“If you are bringing your offering to the altar... go and be reconciled with your brother first.”
(Matthew 5:23-24)*

Today's Gospel creates the image of a person trotting off to church, prepared to put their generous donation in the collection, while leaving someone else distraught after a conflict between them. It might sound be a trivial disagreement – but what if the other person is in fact the innocent victim of some injustice? Some abusers compensate for their behaviour by otherwise being exemplary members of their local community, so much so that when their wrongdoing comes to light, people find it hard to believe. Bullies can shatter someone's self-confidence. Someone who never cleans up after themselves risks treating a family member or a colleague as a servant.

Today's Gospel is not so much about the effects of blazing rows as about establishing relationships of dignity and respect with each other. If we've upset someone, Jesus tells us that we should be prepared to leave our gift before the altar until we have sought peace and reconciliation.

Of course, we could save time and energy by not causing the problem in the first place. It's so easy to be more thoughtful around the house and workplace, recognising the small gestures – such as opening a door for someone, picking up rubbish, or doing the washing up – which contribute to someone else's peace of mind. Often disagreements are caused, not by malice, but by thoughtlessness. It needn't cost anything to be thoughtful.

Prayer

Loving Lord, teach me to be thoughtful, to recognise the little things that I can do and say to make people feel respected and worthwhile. Help me to be kind. Amen.

Saturday 4 March 2023

A different reality

Readings: Deuteronomy 26:16-19; Matthew 5:43-48

But I tell you, love your enemies
and pray for those who persecute you.

Matthew 5:44



“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5:44)

Radio and television news often doesn't include a single item of good news. One prime-time broadcast carried twelve stories, eleven of which dealt with war, crime, disease, economic hardship, political problems, an earthquake and an obituary. The one positive item featured last. The poet T.S. Eliot once declared, “Humankind cannot bear very much reality” – and sometimes we almost forget that “reality”, for most of us, also includes laughter, hope, love, friendship, solidarity and many other qualities that make life worth living.

That's why today's Gospel can breathe fresh air into our world if we will allow it to do so. Jesus tells us that we don't have to hate our enemies: we can love them and make friends with them. That's more easily said than done, especially when we hear of the brutality, power-grabbing or unadulterated greed of some people or groups who become headline-grabbers. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, “If you want peace, you don't talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies.” His words echoed those of Jesus.

In 1994, two years before he and six other monks were kidnapped and murdered in Algeria, Cistercian monk Christian de Chergé foresaw the coming violence and wrote a testament, in which he included a message to his killer: “And also you, my last-minute friend, who will not have known what you were doing: I want this thank you and this goodbye to be a ‘God-bless’ for you, too, because in God's face I see yours.” How many of us could have imitated Jesus so closely?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, give me the courage I need to be a peacemaker. Teach me to forgive. Give me an understanding, compassionate heart. Amen.