

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

Building a 'Civilisation of Love' in an unequal world
"Come now, let us set things right", says the Lord (Is. 1:18)

Dear People of God,

I would like to begin this evening with two quotations from two very different people.

My God these are such distressing times! Tonight for the first time I awakened in darkness; my eyes were stinging; before me passed images and images of human suffering. But there is one thing that is more and more obvious to me, that You cannot help us, but that we ourselves must help You, and in that way we help ourselves.

Etty Hillesum

Let us not claim that things will change if we always do the same thing. Crisis is the best blessing that can happen to persons and countries, because crisis brings progress. Creativity is born of anguish, like the day of the dark night. It is in crisis that resourcefulness, discovery, great strategies are born... Without crisis there are no challenges, without challenges life is routine, a slow agony. Without crisis there is no merit. It is in crisis where the best in each person surfaces, because without crisis the wind has no bite.

Albert Einstein

Two Baptist ministers were walking down a street in the center of Denver. They were on their way to a lunch meeting, and they were discussing the agenda as they dodged through the crowds on the sidewalk. Those crowds, one of them, Steve, said, included lots of other people hurrying to appointments, and there were several of Denver's homeless residents moving much more slowly.

One of those destitute folk was working her way along the sidewalk, asking for handouts. She would approach the professional-types of business and government, asking for their spare change. It is not an uncommon scene in Denver, or any large city.

When she turned toward Steve and his colleague, they sidestepped around her without a break in their conversation. She was not one to be so easily dismissed. She picked up her pace to catch up with the pair, and broke into their discussion.

"What?" she snapped. "You won't even look me in the eye?"¹

¹ Rev. Peter Sawtell, *Look me in the Eye*

We are not told about what happened next. But like Steve many of us would have similar incidents to retell. We too can be stopped cold by the easy way we can ignore people in need. These meetings can be uncomfortable reminders to us of spiritual and ethical revelations. How easy it is for us to step around those in need, and to ignore “the least of these”. There is something about human misery that makes us uncomfortable and leaves us feeling vaguely guilty.

The need to “look others in the eye” stretches beyond a poor woman asking for change, and draws us into a direct awareness of relationship with people around the world, those of future generations, and all creation. I know that often I am so wrapped up in my own agenda, my own conversations, my own schedules, that I am oblivious to the needs of others. It is so easy to sidestep the ones who might shake up my world, or make me think differently about my life. How many would want me to look them in the eye, and I don't even notice? I see them in Rome at metro stations sitting with a card in front that says they are hungry or in need and I salve my conscience by putting a few small coins in their bowl, and hurrying on.

Mystics all along have been telling us that we are one, not just human beings, but all creation, the entire universe.

“When I try to wrap my mind around what some researchers are saying about life on both the micro and macro levels, I can scarcely take it in”, says Judy Cannato. “The idea that a butterfly ruffling its wings on a distant continent affects my energy staggers my imagination. The notion that after two energy fields (and each of us is an energy field) encounter one another they are forever connected fills me with reverent wonder. When I learn that all matter that now exists was formed billions of years ago and has been recycling since the beginning of time, and that each of us is composed of the same matter or energy of all that has gone before us, I stand in awe.”

We are a relational species and deep down we know we are our brothers and sisters keepers! “We are not completely separate from others but live in and through a complex set of relationships we hardly notice. Interdependent and mutual connections are integral to all of life.”²

Steve encountered Christ when a homeless woman demanded to be acknowledged as a human being. Genuine spiritual experiences are not always fun. We may not always want to meet Christ on the street or in the store.

² Judy Canatto, *Quantum Grace*

Christ came into my room the other day
and stood there,
and I was bored to death,
I had work to do.

I wouldn't have minded if he'd been crippled
or something. . . I do well with cripples!
but he just stood there. . . all face
and with that damned guitar.

I didn't ask him to sit down. . .
He'd have stayed all day.

So I said to him after a while,
"Well, what's up? What is it you want?"
and he laughed. . . stupid!
Said he was just passing by and thought he'd
say "Hello".

Great! . . . I said "Hello" . . . So he left.
And I was damned mad!
I couldn't even listen to the radio.
I went and got some coffee. . .

The trouble with God is
S/He always comes at the wrong time
and in the wrong garb. . .³

When I consider the stories about Jesus, I see over and over again how he opened himself to those encounters. Can you imagine anyone ever saying to Jesus, "What? You won't even look me in the eye?"

There is a Hindu saying that is very apt here: "I looked into the distance and saw something moving, and I thought it was an animal. As it came closer I saw it was a man. When I stood and looked into his eyes, I saw it was my brother!"

If our personal spiritual lives and our collective experience in church shield us from those intense experiences, then we are violating the calling of our faith. If we think that spirituality and church are a refuge from those uncomfortable encounters, then we're probably missing the Christ among us.

Dom Pedro Casaldaliga from Brazil said: "We must keep repeating it: without the poor there is no salvation, without the poor there is no Church, without the poor there is no gospel".

³ The Problem with God

I came across a poster that read:

*When they come for the innocent
Without crossing over your body,
Cursed be your religion!*

In the 1970s the stage was set for us to place the agenda of the poor at the centre. 'A deafening cry pours from the throats of millions of [people] asking their pastors for a liberation that reaches them from nowhere else'⁴ said the Latin American Bishops Conference in Medellin.

The way was also prepared by the 1971 Synod of Bishops on *Justice in the World* which again recognized 'the Church's vocation to be present in the heart of the world by proclaiming the Good News to the poor, freedom to the oppressed and joy to the afflicted'. It confirmed the right of the poor to take their future into their own hands and the Church's duty to give witness to justice by first being just herself.

'Need for conversion on the part of the whole church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation'⁵

'The validity of our mission will depend to a large extent on our solidarity with poor people'.

Forty years ago when the Bishops of Ireland asked that a national charity be set up, they little realised the enormous impact this would have, both here in Ireland as well as among communities abroad. An impact not only in terms of people and communities helped, but also of deep truths uncovered and fleshed with new significance. And now we celebrate the 40th anniversary of that time.

A 40-something time period, whether days, months, or years is ALWAYS a period of testing, trial, probation, and ends with a period of restoration, revival or renewal. We are also told in midrashic writings that 40 days was the length of time it took for the disciple to learn the rabbi's teaching well enough to repeat it word for word.

Exodus 40:36-38 tells us:

In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.

⁴ Medellin 1968

⁵ Puebla 1979

What does it mean to be a people obedient to the cloud? What does it mean to be living in constant awareness of the pulls and tugs of the Spirit? I believe it leads us to a certain discipline and a way of seeing that grows on one. Following the cloud leads one to grapple with a living God. The term 'Living God' is steeped with biblical overtones. It is literally the opposite of dead. How many of us worship dead gods -- Gods that have no energy or spirit, no designs to liberate or heal? The living God always approaches us from the future to do something new. The living God is dynamic, bounteous and full of surprises. And finally, staying with the living God is also fraught with challenge and risk – as the Israelites discovered in their forty-year wandering.

Where is the living God found today? As always, in everyday life. Jesus found God in the everyday and teaches us to do the same. Our realisation of God has moved from an Elsewhere God to an Everywhere God, from God being 'out there somewhere' to God being right here with us, among us, within us.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is the true image of our world. Apparently, the story originated in an Egyptian legend, taken up either by Jesus or Luke. That means that the scandal is age-old and has persisted throughout history. What strikes me most strongly in the story are Abraham's final words to the rich man: "They will not change even if someone rises from the dead". That is true. We don't know what needs to happen to make the international community feel any remorse about this enormous inequality and respond to it with radical compassion.

In truth the tragedy of the story is that Lazarus is invisible. He has been erased from the rich man's mind – deleted in the way that people of privilege delete the homeless from their personal landscapes.

The rich man is not punished for being rich. The fault lies in his neglect of the needy at his doorstep. One of the strangest things about this parable is that even after his death, nothing changes with regard to the rich man's attitude toward Lazarus. He still cannot see him as a person of worth, but rather as a servant to be sent to relieve his pain, or to warn members of his family. In other words, the rich man is suffering but unrepentant.

The message here is a common one for Jesus throughout the Bible. Wealth is not inherently sinful, but it can be spiritually debilitating. Especially when it gives you the illusion of control and makes you feel god-like.

All humanity should feel ashamed at this co-existence of the rich man and Lazarus, before even asking what caused it. It is not merely unjust but disgraceful, that in a world of abundance, four hundred times more resources are spent on pregnancy care and the birth of a baby in the rich world than in Ethiopia; that a Salvadoran woman working in a sweat-shop should earn 29 cents for each shirt that the multinational Nike sells to the NBA for 45 dollars; or that one kidnapped white person is more newsworthy than a thousand tortured and murdered Congolese. It is

no wonder that Mayor Zaragoza can conclude: "The richest, most powerful countries have abdicated from democratic principles (justice, freedom, equality, solidarity) in favour of the laws of the market".

In her wonderful book, *Quest for the Living God*, Elizabeth Johnson writes about an experience she had when she visited the concentration camp at Dachau. "There was one unexpected moment that stunned my thought. In the camp museum, amid the tools of torture and other paraphernalia, there hung a striped outfit worn by one inmate named Albert Mainslinger. Next to it were displayed two pieces of paper, documents filled out when he entered and left the camp. In 1939 his admission form listed his weight as 114 kg and, further down, his religion as Roman Catholic. In 1945 his discharge form, signed by the American administrator of the camp, contained different information. His weight was 41 kg. On the line for religion was written *Das Nichts*, nothing. I stared struck silent. Who can fathom the suffering – unjust imprisonment, years of slow starvation, morning, noon and night trying to evade the terror meted out by the guards, unremitting hard labour in the cold and the heat, people in agony all around, having no idea when this would ever end or if the next minute would bring his death. As his body withered so too did his soul, any trust in a good and gracious God evaporating away."

Theologians after World War II reflected that such evil cannot be made to fit meaningfully into a divine plan for the world. Even attempting to do this would be to domesticate the evil, to dilute its terror, to give it, even unintentionally, a right to exist. Such attempts mock the voices of the victims. And to allow that this event is a part of an overall divine plan for the world would be to make God into a monster. The conclusion was that theologians could no longer talk about God with their backs turned to Auschwitz. "A theology which did not speak of God in the sight of the one who was abandoned and crucified would have nothing to say to us then," writes Jürgen Moltmann.

The concern of post-war theologians was human suffering. This was not primarily the suffering that is part of human life as bodies age and sickness takes over, or the heartache of human relationships, or the anxiety of daily living. Beyond this there is a "wretched excess of affliction that occurs from injury that people inflict unjustly on one another en masse: grinding poverty and hunger, slavery, domestic abuse, rape, murder, war, genocide. This is harm that destroys persons and their ability to love; it assaults their identity and violently extinguishes their life."⁶

Ignacio Ellacuria said: "Together with all the poor and oppressed people in the world, we need utopian hope to encourage us to believe we can change the course of history. And not only change its course, but subvert it and set it going in another direction". Thank God for Trocaire which does just this.

⁶ Elizabeth Johnson

In order to deal with this, the young German theologians began to use the term 'political theology'. It is a theology that seeks to connect speech about God with the city (polis), the public good of massive numbers of people, living and dead. Such theology is wary of privatised religion that focuses on an individual's religious experience and morality alone. Such a narrow view has contributed to the failure of the churches to vigorously oppose injustice. Post-Holocaust theology *rediscovered* a God deeply involved with the pain of the world.

The biblical prophets were riveted by a glimpse of God's heart which burned with care. It was this view that gave them the strength to proclaim, in God's name, their biting critique of social evil and hopeful consolation for the afflicted. God is a God of pathos who feels intensely: loves, cares, is glad, gets angry over injustice, urges, prods, forgives, is disappointed, gets frustrated, suffers righteous indignation, weeps, grieves, promises, pours out mercy, rejoices, consoles, wipes away tears, and loves some more. Such a theology stands in profound contrast to modern theism where God is seen with all the "omni" attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence. "In the light of Auschwitz, the assumption of the omnipotence of God seemed a heresy," wrote Dorothy Soelle, ethically offensive and impossible to believe.⁷

The first step to encountering God is to clash against reality which is neither invented nor dreamed of by us. We bump into God by bumping into harsh and occasionally brutal reality. It resists our manipulations, and on it the ideas and images about God which we have invented simply disintegrate. In an extremely short poem, Pedro Casaldaliga, the Claretian, poet and bishop of a diocese with a predominantly indigenous population in Brazil, utters a cry: "Everything is relative, apart from God and hunger".⁸

In Latin America, base Christian communities made a startling discovery: *in situations of misery God is not neutral*. When people are ground down, this violates the way God wants the world to be. In response, the living God makes a dramatic decision: to side with the oppressed peoples in their struggle for life. The purpose of this divine partiality is to heal, redeem, and liberate the situation so that the dehumanising suffering will cease. Precisely in this partiality is the goodness of divine love revealed to be truly universal, because it includes the nonpersons whom the powerful and wealthy thought did not count.

Listen to the way the Holy One summons Moses from the burning bush in the desert. The four verbs of this text are utterly revelatory of the heart of God:
I have seen the misery of my people here in Egypt; I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know well what they are suffering; therefore I have come down to deliver them. [Ex. 3:7-8]

⁷ Elizabeth Johnson

⁸ Martha Zechmeister, *The Mysticism of Mission*

The text reveals that the God of Israel sees, hears, knows (feels) the affliction of these enslaved people, and so comes to set them free. No wonder the bush was on fire!

For decades the concern of European church leaders and theologians has focussed on persons whose faith is threatened by the acid of secular, atheistic culture. Our Year of faith is strongly about that. Among the poor, by contrast, the focus is not on the non-believer struggling for faith but on the non-person struggling for life. Here the question is not whether God exists, but how to believe in God amid such inhumane suffering. The quest for an answer moves theology to proclaim the true God of life against false idols.

Idolatry entails putting alien gods before the true God of the Bible. In the Church of the Poor these gods are money, the comforts it brings, and the power necessary to make and keep it. And like all false gods, money and its trappings require the sacrifice of victims. The truth of God is twisted to justify human oppression, and companion creatures are demeaned in the name of a distorted view of divine will. On this frontier a profound challenge goes forth to the whole church: *stop trivialising the scandalous statements that scripture makes about God.*

I would like to finish with a reading of the Scriptures that allows us to see how central Jesus' cry for justice is to the whole scene. It is not about another world that he alludes, not about 'salvation' for the sake of heaven or the soul. It is about this world and the right relationships that are central to being human, and thus finding our soul. Jesus did not come to 'save' our souls, rather to 'restore' our souls!

In the parable that we have called the unjust judge, or the importunate widow, we come across the story of the widow crying for justice and the judge procrastinating. We know that justice delayed is justice denied, and are amused by the widow's persistence. Eventually, out of sheer exasperation, the judge rules in her favour even though he fears neither God nor human opinion. Luke tells us that this illustrates the need to pray always and never give up.

It is easy for us to identify with the widow – that is the way the parable is normally explained to us in homilies. Keep praying, make a pest of yourself and God will eventually be driven to hear you. But then that makes God the 'unjust judge'! Perhaps another way of reading this subversive parable and one which fits in to Jesus's whole stance is to see God as the widow.

Jesus is challenging the audience to live justly, so that God will find faith on earth. All of this puts us in the role of the unjust judge. To understand ourselves as judge, just remember the story we began with: Steve and his reluctance to look the woman in the eye. We carry on our lives ignoring issues about justice and many times don't care much for our neighbour. Perhaps we are too self-centred, too concerned about our busyness that we don't have time to live deeply in our faith? Have we let

ourselves ignore cries for justice because we live a little too comfortably, separated by oceans or walls or our electronic security systems?

Leonardo Boff says: "When future generations judge our times, they will call us barbarians, inhuman and pitiless, because of our heartlessness towards the sufferings of our brothers and sisters."⁹ Jean Ziegler says: "A child who dies of hunger is murdered".

A few years ago *Medecins sans Frontieres* published a list of 'the most forgotten humanitarian crises in the International Media during 2005'. Millions of people are suffering extreme want and daily violence, that has worsened over the last few months; nevertheless, they are completely ignored by the rest of the world'. The reality of the Third World is silenced.

And as well as that, there is the ongoing forgetfulness, which has now become a matter of course. 9/11 is well known because it was a terrorist attack on the United States. But 10/7 is completely ignored. On 7 October 2001 the international democratic community bombed Afghanistan. The date 11 March 2004 is well known in Spain for the attack on Madrid. But on 20 March 2003 the bombing of Iraq began, and nobody remembers that date. The poor have no calendar. They do not exist. Forgetting is natural. And all this happens in a world that is more connected than ever before, a globalized world.

Perhaps a different story, one that I often use, might bring the message home in a more striking fashion. In 2004, the film "Hotel Rwanda" was screened. The movie was about the 1994 mass genocide of the Tutsi tribe in Rwanda by the Hutu majority. A reluctant hero is found in Paul Rusesabagina, the manager of an upscale European hotel who finds a way to offer asylum to and save the lives of nearly 1300 Tutsis.

A repeated theme in the film is that if the West, the powerful Americans or Europeans, only knew about the genocide, they would do something about it.

In one very dramatic scene in the film, a news cameraman returns to the hotel with footage of the barbarity he has witnessed. Paul Rusesabagina sees this and says to the man that this evidence will move the West to intervene. But the cameraman differs. Out of his experience he tells Paul that people will merely look up briefly from their dinner table, comment on how horrible it all is, and then return to the normalcy of their meal.

Unfortunately, the world was like the unjust judge, as "over the course of a 100 days, almost one million people were killed in Rwanda." The streets of the capital city ran red with rivers of blood, but no one came to help. There was no international intervention in Rwanda, no expeditionary forces, no coalition of the willing. There

⁹ The Prayer of St. Francis, 1999

was no international aid for Rwanda. Rwanda's Hutu extremists slaughtered their Tutsi neighbours and any moderate Hutus who stood in their way, and the world left them to it.

When we read the story and see God as the widow and ourselves as the judge, we know that God does not give up on us. Apparently, God operates under the assumption that enough persistence, enough reminding, enough pleading will get our attention and we will work for justice. God refuses to be turned away. She will keep after us until we are moved to act.¹⁰

“I tell you this
to break your heart,
by which I mean only
that it break open and never close again
to the rest of the world.”¹¹

¹⁰ Lori Walke, *The Persistent Widow*

¹¹ Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems, Vol. 2*