

Word of Life – November 1984

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Mt 25:40)

This sentence of Jesus is embedded like a pearl in the well-known passage on the final judgment written by the evangelist St. Matthew. It represents the whole message of the Gospel in summary form, reinforcing all that is affirmed in it regarding the human person and what is expected of him or her.

Jesus, the one long-awaited "by all peoples," came and saved humanity which had fallen into sin. He himself bore the price of such an immense purification. He will return at the end of time under his rightful title as King and Judge and will gather together all peoples of every time and place in order to judge each individual according to their deeds. The result will be either eternal reward or eternal punishment.

However, according to the description of the final judgment that Jesus gave to his disciples, the divine judge will, at that time, say something very surprising: "I was hungry and you gave me food." When, though, did we ever give Jesus food? He goes on to explain:

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

According to that description it seems, therefore, that only at the time of the final judgment we will find out that every person was a brother or sister of Christ's and that therefore every act of love was either done or denied to him.

However, in his infinite love for us, Jesus did not keep this marvellous and tremendous truth hidden until the end of time. Moreover, to highlight all its value and importance, he revealed it to us here, in this passage, against the background of that event which no one will be able to evade.

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Who are the ones that Jesus calls the "the least of these who are members of my family?" The context in which he uses this expression is, as we have seen, universal. It is a judgment to which all are called without distinction. These words, therefore, do not refer only to Christians but to any human person, whether Christian or not, who is in a situation of need or difficulty. The passage refers to those who are hungry or thirsty, to those in need of clothing or housing, to the sick and the imprisoned, but we could easily extend it to include the millions who suffer and are in need and who appeal to us for help, even without words.

These are the ones whom Jesus calls his family and with whom he acknowledges a mysterious solidarity.

Already in the Old Testament God proclaims himself to be on the side of the poor, in particular, but it is never said that he identified himself with them. This came about with Jesus - "God with us" - as he himself said:

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The fact that Jesus identifies with those in need is one of the highest and newest aspects of the Gospel message. When he became man, in fact, the Son of God "though he was rich ...became poor" (2 Cor. 8:9).

He came not to be served but to serve. He cured the sick, relieved those who were suffering and associated with those on the margins of society, certainly not because of their moral or spiritual superiority, but out of love. He loved everyone without distinction but he preferred those who were most urgently in need, going so far as to die on the cross for all of us sinners, in need of forgiveness. He was consistent with this approach after his resurrection. He is present, in fact, in a special way in those who suffer and are in need. At the end of the world he will use our treatment of the poor, the "least," those he regards as "his family," as the criterion for judging us.

Every act towards our neighbour, therefore, is as if done to Christ, and has eternal value.

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This sentence confirms once again that in Jesus' view nothing is more important than love. It is the essence of the Gospel's message.

Love is so important that it is as though someone who concretely helps his brothers and sisters, were actually loving Jesus in them, even if the person who helps does not realise it. They will therefore be able to enter with him into the Father's Kingdom. Indeed, His Kingdom will fill their hearts already here and now.

It is clear therefore how we can put this word of life into practice. Let us begin immediately by recognizing Jesus in whoever passes us by, casting aside old fashioned distinctions between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, the likeable and unlikeable, old and young - treating each neighbour as we would actually treat Jesus.

Whatever our role in society, let's not miss any opportunity to love, above all those who are most in need - the hungry, the homeless, the sick, drug addicts, the unemployed, those most marginalised in society - those we hear about day by day, in our cities or in faraway countries. When we forget we can always start again right away. We will never be without a neighbour to love.

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