

Reflections on Sunday's Readings: September 29, 2019

Twenty-Sixth Sunday / World Day of Migrants and Refugees

Amos 6: 1a, 4-7

1 Timothy 6: 11-16

Luke 16: 19-31



Partnership with God to Transform the World

Introduction

Deep within us, we know things are not the way God hopes for them to be in our world. We know this because God's truth, goodness, and beauty are alive within us. We also know this when we take time and make the effort to hear God's Word and know God's vision for us, especially seen in Jesus. When we make these efforts, we grow stronger in the ways of God.

Luke is very aware that with Jesus and his Gospel, the arrival of God's kingdom (reign, way) has begun in a definitive way. We can see and trust that God is acting in unseen ways to undo the evil that we humans have introduced into creation. This means that our Good God is hard at work to re-create us in the human family and to restore all of creation so it shines forth with the beauty, goodness, and truth in the heart of God.

This also means that we are all called to a deep conversion of the ways we operate now.

The Problem of Evil

To make a start here, in the traditional moral theology of the Catholic community, we say there are three sources of evil: **the world, the flesh, and the devil**. I have found Dom Helder Camara's explanation of these three sources of evil to be very helpful in understanding them. Dom Helder Camara was the archbishop of the Diocese of Olinda and Recife in Brazil for over 20

years (1964-1985). Dom Helder speaks about this breaking away from God's plans as a spiral of violence spiraling from the bottom up.

Evil influences from "the world" are the lies or false assumptions that we are taught from our culture or our families about power, prestige, and possessions. One example possibly would be that we are taught that men are more important than women, or another example would be that a person's color or the country they come from makes them "less than" our culture or our values of personhood.

This energy can then spiral into "the flesh" which are our personal evil and bad choices that hurt others or ourselves. And at the top are those sources of evil called "the devil." These are "diabolical" because they are often the most subtle sources of evil. They are hard to name and to see because they are woven into our institutions, for example, the high budget for war and our military industrial complex in place of giving energy and treasure to the work of diplomacy and peace-making, the laws of the market economy that have no regard for those who don't make it in the system, going with retributive justice and punishment instead of making the effort for restorative justice, or the setting of tax breaks to benefit the rich instead of those in need, etc. [1]

It is like the economic crisis in recent years where some banks were said to be too big to fail. These systems are so much a part of our lives that it is difficult to discern what is helpful here and what institutionalizes our biases, fears, sins, and evil, and keeps us from healthier choices and structures.

Cosmic Transformation

Throughout Jewish history and into the times of the Gospels, the conversion of the ways we operate as human persons has often been proclaimed as the "great reversal." The prophets speak to this, and Luke and Jesus are aware of this also. For example, Luke begins his Gospel with Mary's song called the "Magnificat" as she greets Elizabeth. This is a clue for Luke who is very concerned about social justice and weaves these themes throughout his Gospel. Here Mary sings praise to God for the rise of the lowly and the fall of the mighty from their thrones. This signifies the coming of a world where there is no more hunger, illness, war, or poverty. It is a cosmic transformation that God wants to ... and is ... bringing about, especially through the life, words, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

Luke's Parable Today

The parable in today's Gospel makes this cosmic transformation and reversal "personal." The person who in this life experienced extravagant pleasure does in the story experience torment after death, while the homeless leper enjoys comfort in the companionship of his ancestors. Lazarus is up close to Abraham, being held near his heart.

The rich man seeing Lazarus ... and it is curious that he knows the man by name, but he never engaged him or saw his needs ... now asks Abraham to send him as a servant to meet his thirst.

But Abraham explains that there is a “chasm” between them ... a “chasm” that the rich man built in his life on earth, and it follows him now.

Part of the torment for the rich man is the isolation that he has placed himself in with his lifestyle where he was the center of his concern. He has closed himself in with a circle of those he cares about, and it is a circle all for pleasure and luxury.

Another part of the torment might likely be some growing awareness that he could have made a difference in the leper’s life, and in others’ lives like him, if only he had really “seen” him and encountered him. The rich man might be seeing more clearly the cost of his indifference.

Point of the Story

But the whole point of the parable is that these “chasms” need not exist. Moses and the prophets, and now Jesus as the greatest of the prophets, point to the inclusion of all in the bounty of God: now and in the life to come. The great reversal or cosmic transformation that God is working on in the human family is our call as disciples. We are to live this reversal or transformation, here and now, through our conversions and openness to the Spirit. We are called to sacrifice luxuries to provide for other’s necessities in order to assure that others are fed and clothed. We are invited to leave behind achievements and status to risk speaking up for those who are poor, lowly, and marginalized in the human family. We are called to see that every act of mercy that we offer proclaims our faith in Christ and reveals God is still at work **making all things new**. Every time we engage another person to know more of their story and their needs ... we are attuned to the great work that God is doing in the story of the human family and all of creation.

We are meant for solidarity and empathy with one another, and our time together in prayer as a community helps to keep these virtues growing within us. We have our limits and our appropriate boundaries to be mindful of, but we are also called to be mindful of one another as we are able.

World Day of Migrants and Refugees

This Sunday is also “World Day of Migrants and Refugees” in our Catholic community. I wanted to offer two paragraphs of a letter that Pope Francis wrote to us ... so you can hear his own words today.

The most economically advanced societies are witnessing a growing trend towards extreme individualism which, combined with a utilitarian mentality and reinforced by the media, is producing a “globalization of indifference”. In this scenario, migrants, refugees, displaced persons and victims of trafficking have become emblems of exclusion. In addition to the hardships that their condition entails, they are often looked down upon and considered the source of all society’s ills. That attitude is an alarm bell warning of the moral decline we will face if we continue to give ground to the throw-away culture. In fact, if it continues, anyone who does not fall within the accepted norms of physical, mental and social well-being is at risk of marginalization and

exclusion.

For this reason, the presence of migrants and refugees – and of vulnerable people in general – is an invitation to recover some of those essential dimensions of our Christian existence and our humanity that risk being overlooked in a prosperous society. That is why this Sunday is *not just about migrants*. When we show concern for them, we also show concern for ourselves, for everyone; in taking care of them, we all grow; in listening to them, we also give voice to a part of ourselves that we may keep hidden because it is not well regarded nowadays. [2]

Conclusion

One final thought I would like to offer you is from a novel that I became aware of in my seminary days. It is called The Woman Who Was Poor by Leon Bloy. Bloy was writing about the conditions he saw around him at the end of the 1800's and the early 1900's in France.

This novel tells the story of a woman who was poor, but who tried to live her Christian values as best she could. There is a haunting final line in the novel. As the woman nears the end of her life, these words are spoken: "In the end there is only one sadness, and that is not to be a saint." [3] ... Or today from our reflection: "not to be a disciple."

[1] See "The World, the Flesh, and the Devil," pp. 214-15, in Richard Rohr's Yes, And ... Daily Meditations (Franciscan Media, Cincinnati, Ohio: 2013).

[2] See "Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 150th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2019, p. 1.
(w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20190527_world-migrants-day-2019.html)

[3] See The Woman Who Was Poor by Leon Bloy.

Fr. Henry B. Beck, OFM / St. Francis Retreat House, Easton, PA.