

Why be envious because I am generous?

Mt 20: 1 – 16

A few years ago I was approached in the street by a young man begging for a dollar. He said he was hungry, and he looked it, too. I felt in my pocket – but alas! I had no change.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “If I had a dollar I would give it to you, honestly, but I just don’t have one, so I’ll just have to give you this ...” – and gave him a \$5 note.

“Oh mate!” he exclaimed, “Oh mate ... if anyone ever hassles you in the city, I’ll be there for you!”

I’m not holding myself up as any great model of generosity ... though I think that this was probably one of my better moments. But I tell the story to remind myself, as well as you, that one of the characteristics of the saints is generosity – a prodigious generosity, which we ought show to others precisely because it is shown to us first by God.

As a boy at a Jesuit school, I learned by heart one of Saint Ignatius’ great prayers:

Dearest Lord, teach me to be generous.
Teach me to serve thee, as thou deservest.
To give, and not to count the cost;
To fight, and not to heed the wounds;
To toil, and not to seek for rest;
To labour, and not to seek reward,
Save that of knowing that I do thy holy will.

Ignatius never did things by halves, of course. Before his conversion, when he was a soldier, his leg was shattered by a cannonball, and it set crookedly. He had it re-broken and re-set not once, but several times, until he was satisfied that it was perfectly straight. But grace built on that nature – impetuous but generous, determined but great-hearted. He read a book entitled *The Lives of the Saints*, and was moved to ask himself, “What if I were to be another Dominic or another Francis?”

Saint Dominic’s life is equally full of examples of his generosity. As a young student at Palencia, he sold his precious books – each worth far more than an iPad in today’s terms – in order to buy food for the hungry poor when a bad harvest had hit the land. There are little gestures we read about in occasional asides in the witnesses at his canonisation procedure, or in the biography written by his friend, Blessed Jordan. He brought a set of wooden spoons back from Spain for the sisters in Rome, for example. A little thing, you think? Remember, he walked every mile of that journey, carrying only the bare essentials ... and those spoons! He was unusual, too, in that, even when travelling, he insisted on saying – or, rather, singing – Mass every day, and that he could rarely do so without weeping. He was especially generous with God, you might say.

25th Sunday of the Year

Generosity has been considered one of the characteristic marks of the Australian character, too. The late Les Murray has a delightful poem on the spirit of Australia entitled *The Quality of Sprawl*.

Sprawl is doing your farming by aeroplane, roughly,
Or driving a hitchhiker that extra hundred miles home.

Sprawl is, he says

An image of my country. And would that it were more so.

But sprawl is not universally popular:

Sprawl gets up the noses of many people.
Some people have been shot for sprawl!

If we think of the extraordinary generosity of those who went to two world wars, for example, we can see that our country was forged in generosity of spirit. And the welcome we gave to refugees after the Second World War and again after the Vietnam War were genuine manifestations of that spirit.

The willingness of Australians to accept great deprivations of liberty and great and unexpected financial hardship in order to protect each other from the ravages of coronavirus is, I believe, the latest expression of that generosity. We are doing this for the community; and if the selfish foolishness of a few tends to grab the headlines, we know that in fact the vast majority of Australians are accepting personal deprivation precisely for the common good.

Jesus' parable reminds us that we have all received from God's generosity first. To use Les Murray's word, creation is God's first sprawl. And what a sprawl it is! Every new discovery in astronomy pushes out further our knowledge of this vast universe we inhabit – and the more we know about it, the more we realise that there is so much more to discover about it. But nuclear physics shows us the sprawl goes inwards, too: the atom is a world far more wondrous than Democritus, who first proposed the idea of atoms, could ever have dreamed.

But, extraordinarily prodigal as it is, creation was only the beginning. God's greatest sprawl was when he gave himself to the universe, through the person of Jesus Christ, both God and Man. God's greatest sprawl is revealed in the Suffering, Death and Resurrection of Jesus ... and in the Eucharist we are invited to share in that prodigious gift of Himself.

Let us never under-estimate the infinite generosity of God, which we celebrate and experience in the Eucharist!

*St Dominic's, Camberwell
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