

LIVING FOR OTHERS: 6TH SUNDAY OF EASTER B

Fr Brian Gleeson CP

Along the path of life, we come across both selfish and unselfish people. To which group do you and I belong? Perhaps we are a mixture of both generosity and selfishness. But to the extent that we may still be partly selfish, self-centred, and self-indulgent, we are not living the message of Jesus: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15:12-13).

Jesus lived his entire life for God and others. Speaking God's love to people, showing them God's love, and living God's love for them, that's what Jesus of Nazareth was all about. He practised no racism, no apartheid, and no discrimination. To rich and poor, powerful and powerless alike, he reached out with unstinting love. Nobody was excluded from the love burning in his great heart. He died just as he had lived - with love and generosity, kindness, compassion and forgiveness in his heart.

Ever since, hundreds and thousands of his followers have lived his example and commandment. I'm thinking of so many good mothers and fathers, who have given everything they could to the care of their children, friends, neighbours and strangers. I'm thinking of so many religious, men and women, who have laid down their lives in the service of others, and even more particularly of religious Sisters. A little while ago in the press and other media both here and overseas, there was an outpouring of love, appreciation and gratitude for the lives and work of religious Sisters. For the ways they have befriended people on the margins! For the ways they have educated, often completely free of charge, a countless number of children of poor families! For their pastoral care and kindness to patients in hospitals! For their visits to lonely and troubled prisoners in prison cells! For their shelter and support to abused and hurting mothers and children! For their outreach to refugees and asylum-seekers! The list of their good deeds is endless. Their example of their humble and generous service leaves us in no doubt that the meaning of life is to be a loving, caring person.

Let me illustrate the impact of such people with two striking examples, one a man, the other a woman. The first is a Polish man, Maximilian Kolbe, who was born in 1894. Killed by the Nazis in 1941, he was canonized as a martyr by Pope John Paul II in 1982. In 1911 he professed his first vows as a Conventual Franciscan friar. After ordination in 1918, he energetically shared his Catholic faith in print and radio. In 1930 he went as a missionary to Japan. On the outskirts of Nagasaki, he founded a monastery (still standing), a Japanese newspaper, and a seminary.

Back in Poland during the Second World War, he provided shelter to refugees from Greater Poland, including 2000 Jews whom he hid in his friary residence from Nazi persecution. The Gestapo arrested him in 1941 and threw him into prison. In Auschwitz his offer to die in place of the life of a married man with a family, was accepted. After two weeks of starvation, an injection of carbolic acid ended his life on August 14th. He was found sitting against a wall, his face radiant, his eyes open and fixed on a certain spot. John Paul II named him 'the patron saint of our difficult

century'. Our Anglican brothers and sisters have honoured him with a statue along with those of nineteen other 20th century martyrs, on the facade of Westminster Abbey, London.

My second example of faithful caring love is the Australian Sister of St Joseph, Irene McCormack. She may be recognised as Australia's next Saint. On her mission to the Pueblo people of Peru she was martyred by Marxist guerrillas on Tuesday, May 21st, 1991.

Irene left Australia for Peru in 1987. Her aim was to keep bringing God's love and literacy to poor and marginalised persons, just as she had done in Australia. She understood that going into Peru was to go into the unknown, but with trust in God. She noted that her life among the people there was 'a gift' from God. In the village of Huasahuasi (population 5000) high up in the Andes mountain range, she ran a simple village school and library for the local children, led prayer services on Sundays when the priest was away, and supervised a community kitchen from which she distributed food to poor families. This helped to supplement nutrition from the potatoes and maize they grew themselves. But the thugs who shot her sentenced her, so they said, for 'pushing "Yankee" food' and 'bringing in books' 'to push "Yankee" ideas'.

To know these saints of our times is to be inspired to imitate them in their constant unselfish generosity. This, of course this is a big ask. But with God on our side, surely, we can do better and become better persons than we already are! For this to happen to us, let us make our own again and again St Ignatius Loyola's famous Prayer for Generosity:

Lord, teach me to be generous
Teach me to serve you as you deserve,
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 ask for any reward
but that of knowing that I do your will. AMEN.