

The Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time February 20, 2022

It has been about two months now since one of the great moral voices of the world has died - Archbishop Desmond Tutu. As the first black Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, he worked to bring an end to the racist policy of apartheid. And when that dehumanizing system of discrimination was finally dismantled, he worked to bring forgiveness and reconciliation between the white and black populations of his country so that there could be a future of peace for all people in South Africa.

The sense of justice that burned within Archbishop Desmond Tutu had its beginnings in a simple incident that happened to him on the streets of his hometown when he was just a boy. During his youth - and indeed during most of his life - it was expected that black people would step off the sidewalk and into the street when a white person came walking toward them. One day, while young Desmond was walking with his mother, a white Anglican priest came walking toward them. The priest told them not to get off the sidewalk and instead he tipped his hat to them in a sign of love and respect.

Young Desmond was very moved by this gesture and it made him wonder what kind of man this priest was and what religion he believed in. He wanted not only to be a part of that religion but to be a priest in it himself. Thus began his vocation to the Anglican priesthood which led him to speak out against injustice everywhere in society.

It is one thing when we hear people talking about equality, justice, and love. But when we actually see people living out those values in the everyday choices they make, then we start to pay attention. We will listen to such people, and we will follow such people. That is what happened to young Desmond Tutu when he encountered a white man willing to show him love and respect because of his belief in Jesus. That is what happened to many others who saw in Archbishop Tutu someone who was willing to live the gospel in an uncompromising way.

Many times, when Christians get together, we end up talking about how we can get people to come back to church again. The simple fact is that, if we would put Jesus'

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words into practice, people would come to worship with us. If we were a community that truly valued the poor among us, that welcomed the homeless, and that reached out to sinners, then people would want to join us.

All of us who listened closely to Jesus' words in the gospel today were probably moved by what we heard. It makes sense that if we only love those who love us back and only do good to those who do good to us then there is nothing noble or heroic in that. The truth of Jesus' words resounds in our hearts. It makes us want to be the type of people who can love even our enemies and do good even to those who wish us harm. In the core of our being, we want to be people who forgive, who bless others, and who love unconditionally.

But, as we try to live those words, we come face-to-face with our human weakness. As much as we may want to forgive, we find ourselves holding on to petty grudges. As much as we may want to do good to others, we hear a voice within us asking, "what's in it for me?" And as much as we want to be generous with our possessions, we fear that we will be taken advantage of. So few people take up the challenges of today's gospel because of pride and fear. And when we see others holding back, we are tempted to do the same.

Is it really possible to live the words of today's gospel? Is it really possible to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, and to pray for those who mistreat us? Is it possible to turn the other cheek to those who strike us and give money to those whom we know can never pay us back?

The fact is that, no matter how much we may admire Jesus' words and aspire to live up to them, it is impossible to do so with our human hearts. Only those who know the love of God and have received that love into their hearts can then show such unconditional love to others. Only those who have experienced God's forgiveness can then turn around and forgive others. Only those who know that they are accepted by God just as they are can then love their neighbors without judging them. Only those

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who understand that all they have comes from a generous God can then give abundantly to others.

That brings us to a great saint who lived the gospel of love without compromise - Saint Teresa of Calcutta. One day, a young priest in Rome named Fr. Angelo Comastri, went to the general house of Mother Teresa's order of sisters asking to talk to her. The sister who answered the door told him that it would be impossible for Mother Teresa to talk to him that day, but he was adamant. He insisted that he would not leave until Mother Teresa spoke with him. The young sister went away and, a few minutes later, Mother Teresa appeared. The young priest told her that he had come so that she would pray for him and give him some words of inspiration as he began his priestly ministry. She promised that she would pray for him and then asked him about his prayer life. He told her that he said Mass everyday and prayed the rosary. She told him pointedly that, while that was good, it was not enough. The young priest started to get a little frustrated with Mother Teresa and said to her, "Mother, I thought you would ask me about what charitable works I'm committed to." Mother Teresa looked at him sternly and said, "Do you think that I could practice charity if I did not ask Jesus every day to fill my heart with his love? Do you think that I could go through the streets looking for the poor if Jesus did not communicate the fire of his charity to my heart?" It was then that the young priest understood the secret of Mother Teresa's great love for the poor. She was so captivated by Jesus' love for her that she could then show that same love to others. Without that, it would be impossible for her to love. And he understood that, unless he committed himself to prayer, it would also be impossible for him.

Here, at this altar, we come face to face with Jesus and His love for us. He makes Himself small so that we can receive Him. If we are to be people who love, who forgive, and who give without counting the cost, we have to follow the example that Jesus shows us in the Eucharist. We have to make ourselves small so that we can give ourselves as a gift to others. It is what that young Anglican priest did when he met young Desmond Tutu on the streets. It is what Saint Mother Teresa did every day on

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the streets of Calcutta. It is what we must do if we are to transform this world through the love of Christ.