

GOD'S WORKING THROUGH OTHERS

We probably think too much of our faith as just a vertical relationship between ourselves and God. God deals with us indirectly, through the means of His Word and sacraments. Besides that, our horizontal relationship to our fellow human beings is very much part of our Christian lives, part of our vertical relationship to God, even though it is also indirect. The commandments that speak about relationships between children and parents, the lives of our neighbours, our relationship with people of the opposite sex, how we respect our neighbours' personal property, how we care for their good name, and even our feelings and desires about them and what belongs to them are all part of our Christian faith and life. At the end of Matthew 10 we have a set of three statements that show clearly that faith in God is closely connected with our treatment of Jesus' other disciples (Mt 10:40-42).

The love of God towards sinful human beings is a love that brings pardon. The greatest love of God is towards His own dear Son (Mt 12:5). God has revealed Himself in Jesus and only in Him. Jesus Christ is absolutely paramount in importance. The death of God's Son has brought in a new order, so that His Son is the Founder of the new people of God. These people express their membership in the coming kingdom of heaven through their relationship to others. Consequently, an act of mercy that is shown to the least of the Son of Man's brothers is regarded as help to Jesus Himself, and lovelessness to another human being is the equivalent of lovelessness to Him.

Jesus uses the principle that the way in which people treat an authorised delegate is regarded as treatment of the person who delegated him. "He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who has sent Me" (Mt 10:40). Jesus authorises not only His apostles to act as His official representatives, but also every believer, to serve Him through His "brothers." Usually when a great person authorises someone to represent him, that authority is a great honour. However, representing Jesus in works of love and mercy means humiliation rather than exaltation. It means being like Christ, who humbled Himself in service to others.

Believers in Jesus, not only Jesus' called apostles, should continue to be aware of the great thing that they bring to other people. They bring attachment to Jesus, and, through Him, attachment to God the Father. Jesus associated the apostles whom He sent out and other disciples, like the seventy, with the prophets and righteous men of the Old Testament. Jesus knocked at the doors of people's hearts through His apostles and continues to do that through His called ministers and through every other believer who represents Him. "He who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. He who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward" (Mt 10:41). When people receive what Jesus' representatives say and do, they received Jesus Himself.

Elsewhere Jesus extended this principle. He did not regard only His authorised apostles as His representatives, but even the smallest child. "Whoever welcomes one child like this in My name welcomes Me" (Mt 18:5). Jesus Christ comes to each of us in the person who is suffering distress and needs help. What we do for such a person we do to Him. Our faith, which looks upward vertically to God and His salvation in Christ, cannot be divorced from our horizontal duty to a neighbour in need. "For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave Me a drink. I was a stranger, and you took Me into your homes; naked, and you gave Me something to wear; sick, and you looked after Me; in prison, and you visited Me" (Mt 25:35-36). In the incomparably great way, Jesus is our Substitute and our Intercessor before God. He is for us. However, His substitution also goes in another direction. When we see our fellow human beings we should see our Lord and Saviour behind them. What we do to one another, whether it is good or bad, and also what we fail to do, we either do or fail to do to Jesus Christ. For He comes to us in the form of the needy neighbour, and He wants us to actualise His saving work through them.

These passages use the language of reward, and Jesus consistently expressed the reward as "the kingdom of heaven." He says things like "He will certainly not lose his reward." However, although Jesus often used the language of reward, we have to be cautious not to misunderstand it. We accept without question that God is just. Judgment Day is coming, and the fact that God has given His commandments reinforces our conviction that He is going to re-establish the upset balance of justice on all who have ignored His commandments and violated them. God rejects and punishes unmerciful conduct as wicked. In His teaching Jesus often assumed the principles of punishment and reward. In His parable about the talents (Mt 25) He assumed that God promises rewards for obedient service. Yet, if we expect the line of strict reward, we are in for a surprise. When human beings think of the results of their actions, and reward for them, they measure reward like a claim. They think of what they have deserved from God for what they have done. When Jesus talks about reward, His focus is entirely on God, who is generous. It is the difference between strict, conditional Law and overflowing, unconditional Gospel. God's "reward" is out of all proportion, so much so that it is not really reward at all. He is a Father who gives generously, and His generosity has no relation to what people have deserved.

The parable about the labourers in the vineyard turns on the fact that the owner of the vineyard was generous. The last men to be employed were given payment for a full day's work. Their reward was out of relation to what they had earned. The men who made a claim for more on the basis of what they had achieved were not called "*first*," but "*last*." They should not have been jealous that the owner of the vineyard was generous. The Gospel tells us that God's reward does not correspond to what human beings achieve. He is not like an employer who calculates precisely what his employees have achieved. God wants us to regard Him as a generous and merciful God in relation to us highly imperfect human beings. We think of the Psalms, which describe Him as gracious, merciful, and compassionate. People who think about God in human

terms, simply as the majestic King and strict Judge, cannot understand this, and are confused by talk about God's love, because, when He rewards, He rewards differently. He applies His love generously, bountifully, and prolifically, in a way that only God can do, on people who do not deserve it.

In Palestine and throughout the ancient East it was self-evident that a person had a right to ask for a drink of water. Jesus gave that rule of hospitality a new relationship to Himself. "Whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I tell you, will certainly not lose his reward" (Mt 10:42). A cup of cold water was a small gift, even in everyday Palestine. Jesus' word "only" brings that out, too. Like everything else that Christians do, including eating and drinking, it should all take place to the glory of God and in love for one's neighbour (1 Cor 10:31-33; Rm 14:21). The surprising thing is the attachment of it to a share in the kingdom of heaven. People do not earn the kingdom of heaven by finding thirsty people to help. Jesus Christ's work in making atonement for the sin of the world in eternal life would be meaningless if eternal life came as a reward for our kind deeds. The truth is really seen in the reversing action and motive. Because believers have received eternal life through God's mercy, they demonstrate that they have received it through their acts of mercy to one another. That is the sense in which Jesus promises, "Blessed are those who are merciful! For they will be treated mercifully" (Mt 5:7). The all-important thing is our relationship to Jesus, which our acts of mercy demonstrate. "Anything that you have done for one of My brothers here, even the least important of them, you have done for Me" (Mt 25:40). However, the person who lives only for himself, so that he denies even the tiniest help to another in need will, like the rich man in Hades, thirst in vain for the slightest refreshment in the world to come (Lk 16:21-24).