

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, 15 January 2023

Scriptures: Isaiah 49:3,5-6; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; John 1:29-34

Homily: Fr. Ken

In the first reading from the prophet Isaiah, we hear that the chosen one of God is the light to the nations who will bring salvation to the ends of the earth. That chosen one, John the Baptist tells the people in the Gospel, is Jesus Christ. And it is we today who are called by that same Jesus to follow in his footsteps and to be a light to the nations.

Nelson Mandela was a light to the nations. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose life we celebrate this weekend, was light to the nations. And certainly, our Pope Francis is clearly a light to the nations today.

And so, we ask: How can we become a "light to the nations" today? What can we do in the light of so much poverty in our state, our nation, and our world?

Many decades ago, President Lyndon Johnson in his first state of the union address stated: "This administration here and now declares unconditional war on poverty".

Today, millions upon millions of our fellow American citizens live in poverty. That is the largest number ever in our history. Among those, the largest number are children.

Who lives in poverty? People working at minimum wage, even holding down several jobs; seniors living on fixed incomes; wage earners suddenly out of work; millions of families everywhere from cities to rural communities.

Mahatma Gandhi once said: "Poverty is the worst form of violence".

Poverty destroys the bodies, minds, and spirits of people. It savages and ravages their hopes and dreams and puts them in a prison of fear, danger, and despair.

Statistically, poverty continues to be on the rise in the United States, and worldwide.

What is happening in our nation is also happening around the world. The gap between the rich and the poor is growing in all societies. And there is also the gap between rich countries and poor countries, as Pope Francis has pointed out to us on many occasions already.

As Christians, we need to face what it means that this scourge is everywhere in our times.

What do we see when we see poverty? It is a common condition of being poor that one is always afraid that the good things in your life are temporary, that someone can take them away because you have no power to stop them.

Try to imagine, for just a moment, what it is like to lose your home, to be denied health care, to be unable to pay your bills, or to be hungry.

During the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King once observed: "What good does it do to be able to eat at a lunch counter, if you can't buy a hamburger?"

Any way you cut it, poverty is a debilitating condition that robs millions of men, women, and children of their dignity and self-respect.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said: "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; rather it is whether we provide enough for those who have so little".

It seems as if we are heading to a future where those with money and power will wall themselves off from the indigent, and keep them out of sight and out of mind.

The idea and the ideal of government and society taking care of those who are most vulnerable appears to be no longer on the political agenda of many. In various circles, there appears to be a refusal to talk about the epidemic of poverty.

The words of the very well known spiritual writer, Fr. Henri Nouwen, challenge us. He writes:

"We cannot suffer with the poor when we are unwilling to confront those persons and systems that cause poverty. We cannot set the captives free when we do not want to confront those who carry the keys. We cannot profess our solidarity with those who are oppressed, when we are unwilling to confront the oppressor. Compassion without confrontation fades quickly to fruitless sentimental commiseration."

Perhaps now more than ever, the people of the world need poverty awareness.

There is no quick-and-easy solution to poverty. It will take a concerted effort on the part of government and socially engaged institutions such as our churches, to tackle the problem and change the structures and systems which fuel and perpetuate poverty in all its forms.

And, it will also take the commitment of compassionate individuals willing to learn about poverty and to do what they can to help their sisters and brothers, locally and globally.

It is by doing this, freely and consciously, that we truly can become what Jesus calls us to be, a light to the nations.

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