LENT 5

THE NEW SHOFAR

If our church is not marked by caring for the poor, the oppressed, the hungry, we are guilty of heresy.
Ignatius of Loyola

The Priority for the poor and the demands of Jesus

As we come to the close of **Lent 2025** it is worth pondering this question: **what is the reason Jesus became a man and lived among us**? There are a multitude of answers to this, with most of them missing the fundamental Truth. I would like to highlight the answer given to us by Jesus himself while in Nazareth*: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." …And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing (**Luke 4:17-21**).*

There can be no doubts that shivers must have gone down the spines of the worshippers that day. Isaiah had prophesied that a King was coming to inaugurate a kingdom unlike anything the world had ever seen. Could it be that Isaiah's prophecies were about to come true…Was it possible that justice, peace, and righteousness were about to be established forever? Would this King really bring healing to the parched soil, the feeble hands, the shaky knees, the fearful hearts, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the mute, the broken-hearted, the captives, and sinful souls, and proclaim the year of jubilee for the poor (Isaiah 35:1-6; 53:5; 61:1-2)? Jesus' answer to all these questions was a resounding 'yes,' declaring, '***Today*** this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'"

Jesus had a priority for the poor

While this answer is true, saving souls is only a subset of the comprehensive healing of the entire cosmos that Jesus' kingdom brings and that was the centrepiece of his message….*God was pleased through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross* (Col 1:19-20). Jesus died for our souls, but he also died to *reconcile*—i.e., *to put into right relationship*—all that he created. As King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus is making all things new. This is the good news of the kingdom.

God's word teaches that our brothers and sisters are the continuation of the incarnation for each of us: 'As you did it to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me' (Mt 25:40). The way we treat others has a transcendent dimension: 'The measure you give will be the measure you get' (Mt 7:2). It corresponds to the mercy which God has shown us: 'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you . . . For the measure you give will be the measure you get back' (Lk 6:36-38). What these passages make clear is the absolute priority of 'going forth from ourselves toward our brothers and sisters' as one of the two great commandments which ground every moral norm and as the clearest sign for discerning spiritual growth in response to God's completely free gift. These are the signs of the Kingdom on earth.

God's anawim – poor little ones

Anawim is a Hebrew word from the Old Testament which describes the "poor ones" who remained faithful to God in times of difficulty. These humble people became known as the anawim or the "faithful remnant." The anawim, "the poor and lowly ones". The expression turns up often in the Psalms where it is aimed not just the oppressed, the miserable, the persecuted for justice, but also those who, with fidelity to the moral teaching of the Alliance with God, are marginalized by those who prefer to use violence, riches and power. In this light one understands that the category of the "poor" is not just a social category but a spiritual choice. It is what the famous first Beatitude means: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven*" (**Mt 5,3**). The prophet Zephaniah spoke to the anawim as special persons: "*Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of wrath of the Lord*" (**Zep 2,**3).

The Gospel highlights the anawim as our brothers and sisters

This is the message of the Kingdom the leaders of the Jews could not fathom, why they were happy to stone to death this poor woman. Their attitude to her could not be further removed from that of Jesus. That is the challenge for the Church today, for our parishes and most of all each of us as individuals and as Christian families. We can so easily become distracted from the ***anawim*** among us. We prioritise money, organs, name plaques, buildings, maintenance and a broad range of other self-centred activities. This is not the way of Jesus Christ. It is the woman, the sinner who must be our focus.

We might think it is strange indeed to place the poor at the centre of a strategy for expanding a kingdom, but history indicates that this unconventional strategy had been quite successful. Sociologist Rodney Stark wrote a book outlining the way the early church's engagement with suffering people was crucial to its explosive growth. Cities in the Roman empire "*were characterized by poor sanitation, contaminated water, high population densities, open sewers, filthy streets, unbelievable stench, rampant crime, collapsing buildings, and frequent illness and plagues*".

"*Rather than fleeing urban cesspools, the early church found a niche there*". Stark explains that the Christian concept of self-sacrificial love for others, flowing from God's love for them was a revolutionary concept to the pagan mind. Imagine the impact this had in cities filled with newcomers and strangers. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violence and ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity, and to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.

The world today is little different to that of New Testament times. The ***anawim*** are the ones filled with the grace of God that is meant for us. They are the living incarnation of the Son of God and to find them is to find God at work; ignoring them is ignore God.