THE NEW SHOFAR

Heavenly Father, it is often difficult to be like the good Samaritan and offer genuine compassion to the Poor. Help me to see others through your eyes and to reflect you in the way I show love to others.

JULY 13th

The Option for the Poor in Scripture

One of the key teachings of the Scriptures is that God's Reign is one of justice, love and peace. Throughout the Bible, and especially in the Gospel narratives of the life of Jesus, we see many examples of God's special concern for the poor and the powerless. For example, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus explains his mission as bringing good news to the poor, liberty to captives, new sight to the blind and freedom to the downtrodden (Lk 4: 18 – 19). In the Exodus event, God frees the people from slavery in Egypt, hearing the cry of the poor and oppressed and acting to set them free. The memory of this liberation was to shape the attitude of the Israelites to widows, orphans and strangers, that is, those who were disadvantaged and vulnerable in their own society (Exod 22: 21 – 23). God called the people out of slavery into a covenant relationship, to form a new and more just society. This sense of God as being on the side of the poor as their protector and vindicator is also expressed frequently in the prophetic literature and in the psalms and underpins the Beatitudes. In the parables of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16: 19 – 31) and of the rich fool (Lk 12: 13 – 21), the materially poor are at an advantage regarding salvation because they are painfully aware of their need for God whereas wealth can provide a false sense of security. In Matthew's scene of the Great Judgment (25: 31 – 46) there is just one test oof worthiness – how one has treated the hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick and imprisoned. Jesus identifies totally with them – what we do to them; we do to him.

A Matter of Priority

Making a preferential option for the poor is a way of following the example of Jesus. It is an *option* in the sense of being a conscious choice to be in solidarity with those who are poor, marginalized or disrespected, and it calls upon us to work for structural change to transform the causes of poverty and marginalization. Our preferential option for the poor is a core commitment – it is not optional! It is *preferential* because through this option we give preference or priority in our love to those who are poor.

God's love embraces all of us and so our preferential option for the poor does not exclude care for anyone in need. It calls all of us to right relationships, and it does this by placing those in greatest need at the centre. The experience of the poor and powerless is the test of how just our Church and parish really is.

The "option for the poor"

It is clear that the Gospel instructs us in the preferential respect due to the poor and the special situation they have in society: the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others. This is expected of those who follow Jesus Christ. We make an active choice to put

the needs of the “poor” before anything else. To give preference in our love to the poorest and most vulnerable is not to reject those who are not poor or marginalized, but rather to invite rich and poor alike to enter into right relationships. Importantly, this does not mean that our prioritising of the poor turns us into some kind of social working organisation. It does not mean we reduce salvation to an economic or political project. Human liberation and salvation in Jesus Christ are linked but not the same thing. Our mandate is to work for the salvation of all and while that will include liberation of all from oppression and persecution, these things must not replace the primacy of bringing God’s Good News to all. In order that God’s Kingdom should come it is not enough to establish liberation and to create well-being and development.

We must seek out the poor and not wait for them to come to us

Today’s readings give a timely reminder of our vocation to actively pursue an authentic Christian approach to the liberation of people from poverty and oppression. While it is true that spiritual actions without “***doing***” love for the poor is an empty gesture, so too “***doing***” love of the poor without proclaiming the Gospel is to miss the Truth of the teachings and ministry of Jesus. Our works of outreach, our engagement with the poor by charitable actions must always, always without exception, include the proclamation of the centrality of Jesus Christ in our words and our deeds. Without this overt missionary perspective, we end up as little more than social workers. Our works of love must be such that the face of Christ is revealed in our every word and deed.

This option for the poor reflects the presence of Christ in our faith communities. It is the way we “do” Christianity and our faithfulness to Christ, the validity of our claims to be disciples of Christ can be validated by primacy of our exercise of Christian charity. This expression of *love of our neighbour* is something the whole tradition of the Church bears witness, as Christians have always stood out within the secular society as men and women who love, who prioritise those the world rejects. This is not ideological but is born from the Gospel, founded on Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty (2 Cor 8: 9).

This is about living and acting *as Christ* to the poor

This is crucial when we seek to understand the requirements for *doing* love as a part of our Christian vocation. Christ Himself, Who is God, humbled Himself, making Himself as one with all men and women; and he chose not a life of privilege, but the condition of a servant (cf. *Phil* 2:6-7). He abandoned privilege making Himself a servant. He was born into a humble family and worked as a craftsman. At the beginning of His preaching, He announced that in the Kingdom of God the poor are blessed (cf. *Mt* 5:3; *Lk* 6:20). He stood among the sick, the poor, the excluded, showing them God's merciful love. And He took risks to be at one with the poor.

Therefore, Jesus’ followers recognise themselves by their closeness to the poor, the little ones, the sick and the imprisoned, the excluded and the forgotten, those without food and clothing. This is why Matthew 25 is a *key criterion of Christian authenticity*. If we want to evaluate our faithfulness to our Christian vocations, to the authenticity of our Christian faith communities, this is the Gospel that provides us with the tools of assessment. Whoever it is lying on the side of the road as we make our way through life, our obligation is to pause, to love, to sacrifice and to embrace.