

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

The Book of Exodus provides a perfect backdrop for how Jesus will apply the commandments in how we conduct our daily lives. Exodus 22:20-26 concerns itself with social comportment. “You shall not...” refers to how we are not to mistreat other people. Given their own history of oppression exile, God reminds the Israelites that they were once aliens and therefore should not harm aliens in their own country. There is a strict prohibition against the mistreatment of widows and orphans, those deemed to be most vulnerable and least able to defend themselves. God is making it emphatically clear that no harm should come to the poor and others cast so often on the margins of society. It is a grave sin and source of evil when someone in a position of power abuses the weak and defenseless. God also makes it abundantly clear that even against the sinful behavior of some, he always hears and responds to the cry and pleas of the poor.

As a third grader, I recall my mom speaking of a book she had recently read. *Something Beautiful for God* was published in 1971 and written by Malcolm Muggeridge. He was a well-known journalist who had chronicled a visit with Mother Teresa in Calcutta. This widely acclaimed book was in many ways the world’s introduction to this holy woman and her heroic work among the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta, India. My mom spoke of the powerful witness of this simple nun who gave such witness to the dignity of all human persons. One day I picked up the book and skimmed through its pages in order to see the photographs. I was frightened by the pictures of malnourished children and elderly but I never forgot those searing images. There is one picture of Mother Teresa holding a tiny baby, obviously malnourished and in distress, in her arms. I really believe this was the first time I understood about love. That someone could, and would, love another human being in this way was simultaneously so strange and yet so good.

Muggeridge writes this reflection of Mother Teresa in describing those whom she and her Sisters served: “It is not very often things they need. What they need much more is what we offer them. In these twenty years of work amongst the people, I have come more and more to realize that it is being unwanted that is the worst disease that any human being can ever experience. Nowadays we have found medicine for leprosy and lepers can be cured. There’s medicine for TB and consumptives can be cured. For all kinds of diseases there are medicines and cures. But for being unwanted, except there are willing hands to serve and there’s. loving heart to love, I don’t think this terrible disease can ever be cured.” Mother Teresa often spoke on this idea of being unwanted and the pain of loneliness. She would remark that loneliness does not only afflict the poor and dispossessed, in the material sense. Mother noted that she would meet very powerful, influential and wealthy people who were desperately lonely and isolated.

In today’s Gospel reading from Saint Matthew, we have a continuation of a recurring theme over successive Sundays. The Sadducees and Pharisees continue to test Jesus and entrap him to say something they can use as evidence to indict him. While they are obsessed with the strict letter of the law, Jesus points to a more substantial “spirit of the law.” They ask him which of the commandments is the greatest. “You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” He further expresses that all other laws are contingent upon following this fundamental law of love of God. When we love God, that reality should manifest itself in our love of one another.

–Fr. Tom