

2018 16TH SUNDAY

The poverty we hear about in South Sudan, Ethiopia and parts of India is heart-wrenching. But Mother Teresa would frequently say that there is a worse form of poverty than material poverty. It is to be lonely, unloved and unwanted. A person can be materially well-off and yet be among the world's poorest of the poor.

Yesterday I joined Maria Carruthers as she took Holy Communion to six bed-ridden Catholics at Beetham Healthcare. The residents of Beetham are getting the very best of care. Their rooms are spotlessly clean. The Morning Tea they were being served looked delicious. The staff were cheerful and seemed to be treating the residents with beautiful care.

However our six Catholics are all extremely frail and can do little else than lie in bed. They all receive visits from family members regularly but for the majority of the time they lie in bed- alone. There is no one to be blamed. They are not unloved. But they are still very lonely and are suffering. They are a part of our Parish's poor.

One of our residents, Margaret, suffered a stroke several months ago. The result is that her eyes have become extremely sensitive to light. If the curtains in her room are pulled back she will quickly develop a head ache. So yesterday morning- which was so gloriously warm and bright- all this beauty was cut out- Margaret lay in her bedroom with the blinds drawn, alone in semi-darkness.

When Maria and I entered her room, Margaret's face lit up with joy.

I felt quite guilty. It was three months since I had last visited Margaret. Today's Readings seemed to be aimed directly at me: "Doom for the shepherds who allow the flock of my pasture to go wandering and have not taken care of them."

The 23rd Psalm, the Response to this Reading, reminds me that I have a duty to people like Margaret, who are walking in the valley of darkness, to be with them with my crook and my staff giving them comfort.

In actual fact I left Margaret's room feeling blessed. She told me how, as she lay in her darkened room, she felt Jesus' presence close to her; comforting her and loving her. While she was lonely, most of the time she felt at peace. She saw this as a difficult but very important time in her life.

Her Faith inspired me. But she is not superhuman. I made a resolution to visit her far more frequently. She is very much one of our poor.

In the Gospel we find a third form of poverty different from starvation or loneliness. It is to be deprived of Knowledge.

The Apostles had just returned from their first experience of missionary work. They were tired and needed a rest. Jesus knew this and showed His concern for them by inviting them to go off with Him to a quiet place on the far side of the Lake.

But the planned holiday didn't eventuate. The people Jesus had been teaching and ministering to saw St. Peter's boat heading off and followed it around the shore.

Jesus had every reason to be somewhat upset with them. Give me a break- please!

But no- Jesus was a man of compassion. He knew how hungry these people were for good teaching about God. They were not getting it from their Religious Leaders. Jesus felt sorry for them and ignoring His own need for a break from teaching, set to and taught them all day. And at the end of the day He fed them with a miraculous meal of bread and fish.

And in this Jesus gave a simple but powerful example for all priests. When a person comes to a priest for help, that person is to be embraced and shown the compassion of Christ... no matter the inconvenience. All priests must have the heart of Jesus- the Good Shepherd.

But clearly this Gospel is not just for priests. All of us must have the heart of Jesus.

There are so many people in our neighbourhood who are in need of the necessities of life. We must help them if we can.

There are others who are desperately lonely and feel unloved and unwanted... consider the hundreds in Rest-home care in Gisborne- particularly those who are bed-ridden and need human contact.

But there are also teenagers who are desperate for education. They have never known love or education at home. They have been deformed in their emotional development. They have no love of beauty, no sensitivity to goodness, no ambition to embrace a career and have little possibility of worthwhile employment. Almost inevitably they will eventually be locked up in jail. They are a part of our poor. When we meet them- as we do- we must try

to be as Christ to them- seeing their deep-down dignity and treating them with compassion. We must be alert to these young people and to their needs.

The Christ we must cherish and believe in is Jesus- the Good Shepherd. The Faith has been given to us as a precious gift. We must allow it to form us to be like Christ. We must be Good Shepherds. We are called to be people of compassion- reaching out to the lonely, the depressed and the lost in the many opportunities that come our way each day.

During my meeting with Margaret, God reminded me of how far short of being a Good Shepherd I was to her. It was an important insight which I must take seriously because when I come before Jesus on the day of my death, I will stand accountable.

It would be good for all of us during the coming week to listen in the depths of our hearts to the voice of the Good Shepherd challenging us, I'm sure, to hear the cry of the poor and to respond to them with compassion.