



You did it TO ME

KATHLEEN RUSHTON shows how the righteous described in the parable of Matthew 25:31–46 are imitators of Jesus and in solidarity with the whole Earth community.

In a recent interview Richard Rohr recalled how we have grown up hearing: “We are saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus.” Although proclaimed as the mystery of faith at the centre of the Eucharistic prayer, it remains a somewhat distant belief, as some magical transaction that happened in the heavens in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This results in an “up there” and “back there” belief rather than an experience in our own life.

“The way we are saved by the death and the resurrection of Jesus,” Rohr explains, “is by walking through our own death and resurrection. The important word here is *and*.” Much emphasis is given to the death while “we are not taught much about how to hold the resurrection nor even to go there.” The death part is over-glorified and the resurrection drained. Resurrection is all around us. We see it in spring, the beauty of people, animals, the sky.

Rohr continues: “Yet resurrection is always tempered by the fact it does not last. Not everyone is enjoying the resurrection all the time. We all have to walk through the valley of death, and through solidarity we are with others in their pain as they do so. We are there with others as we watch the evening news, as we see Syria, as we view the refugee camps – or more accurately said, the death camps.”

Solidarity by its very nature provokes action (including, at times, confrontation) but it does so always on the basis of a vision of community and of being called to live with dignity and respect in the human community and Earth community. Mt 25:31–46 takes solidarity with those in pain even further. Jesus declares to the righteous: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, *you did it to me*” (Mt 25:40).

The balancing act of engaging and living with the death-resurrection of Jesus enlarges our soul. As Rohr so aptly says: “We have to stay in both the dance of death and the dance of resurrection.” On any one day or through any one period of our life, we can hope and pray that God leads us to both the resurrection and the valley for there is no other path.

Identifying the Righteous

According to Matthew, the righteous or just are those who are faithful to God's requirements as Joseph was (Mt 1:19). The term suggests faithfulness and perseverance in the difficult, reaching-out-to-the-other work of justice. The righteous, therefore, are blessed because they hunger and thirst for God's justice even when persecuted (Mt 5:6; 10). They welcome/receive the gospel message not only by believing but extending hospitality. Earlier in Matthew hospitality is symbolised by giving "even a cup of water to one of these little ones" (Mt 10:40-42). In the parables of weeds and the fish net, the righteous are vindicated for following and imitating Jesus who is described as righteous (Mt 27:19 which is often translated as "innocent").

The Old Testament traditions show that such works were part and parcel of people's way of living as, for example, expressed in Proverbs: "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full" (Prov 19:17). What is new in Matthew is Jesus' shocking identification with the social and economic needy and the least ones (Mt 25:40). A new twist emerges in being prepared for the unknown time of Jesus' final coming as explored in Mt 24-25. In this sense, Jesus is not really absent at all but nevertheless is present in the needy and the least.

Those in the story, like us today, either help or ignore them: "Truly, I tell you, just as you did (or did not do) to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did (or did not do) to me" (Mt 25:40; 45). Jesus' presence in the needy and the least is part of Matthew's vision of life which is infused with the presence of Emmanuel "God with us" (Mt 1:23), in the community which gathers in Jesus' name for worship (Mt 18:20) and with the Risen One until the end of time (Mt 28:20).

Jesus is absent where we might expect him to be present (for example, in Mt 7:23, "prophesy in your name," "cast out demons," "do deeds of power"). And Jesus is present where he is not expected – in the needy and least ones. We can see that our conduct in this life is of overriding importance, because time and eternity are linked.

Matthew stresses the surprise of both the accused and the blessed who did not realise they touched Jesus in their actions to their neighbour. This is a far-reaching solidarity, but not a total identification, with his brothers and sisters. Their suffering affects him. In other words, Jesus is telling us: "I appear over and over again." "I am present over and over again." He has not been recognised by evil doers or by the righteous when mercy is done or refused. The criterion for showing mercy is how one meets the neighbour in need. Although six areas are named, all need, material and spiritual, is contained in them.

"You Did It to Me"

Recently, I was privileged to attend a Mercy Day celebration assembly for grandparents at St Patrick's School, Bryndwr. The

Feast of Christ the King
25th Sunday After Pentecost
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Sisters of Mercy had opened the school in 1951 and taught there for its first decade. I was deeply moved by the young ones' awareness of those in need in many different everyday ways. After an inspiring and humour-filled presentation of the Works of Mercy in word, action and song, a boy went to the lectern and proclaimed: "A reading adapted from Matthew 25." He continued: "I was alone in the playground and you invited me to join you. I was in trouble and you spoke up for me. I was . . ." Later a St Vincent de Paul Society member, a grandfather, reinforced this by asking: "What are the three verses to remember which sum up what we are to do wherever we are?" Children's voices called out: "Matthew 25:35, 36, 45."

The traditional corporal and spiritual works of mercy now include an eighth work – care for our common home. The spiritual work calls us to contemplate God's world gratefully and the corporal work invites us to perform daily gestures that help build a better world. They call us to acknowledge our human contribution to ecological devastation and to commit firmly to living and acting differently.

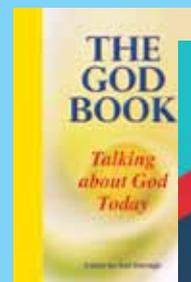
Brendan Byrne suggests that we approach life with one of two attitudes. We can adopt an "exploitative" attitude to everything outside ourselves. This approaches people and creation from the standpoint of our own advantage. On the other hand, we can have a "contemplative" attitude where we reverence and respect the autonomy and uniqueness of every person and of all creation. Only a contemplative attitude and practice enlarges us and enables us to discover Jesus present and to live with paradox, uncertainty and mystery. In this way we stay in "both the dance of death and the dance of resurrection". ■

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