

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Jul 25th 2014

“It’s not about you, it’s about me.”

Sounds like a “break-up” line, doesn’t it?

In my prayer over today’s readings, I received a sense that Jesus might reverse both the wording and context of the above phrase to suit his message for his Apostles—and us. The phrase would be more to the liking of, “It’s about you; it’s not about me.”

Just before this scripture passage begins, Jesus shared with his Apostles that very soon he was going to have to serve others in a very unpleasant way—suffering on a tragic scale--to fulfil his mission on earth. His loving Kingdom was at hand.

He was also trying to help his followers understand that serving (although serving in the intense fashion he was about to do was not called for by everyone) was the way to be his follower. Serving others was the way to fulfill their calling—to bring about the Kingdom. Being a member of his family in his Kingdom was not about ruling over others; it was about serving them.

His Apostles had not quite fully understood this yet. Fortunately, Jesus, being both human and divine, knew full well how our nature is integrated. Our humanity, we are born with; our divinity—our spark of the divine—is granted to us through baptism. Jesus looked to both sides of our nature to help us see that by our serving of others, we become fulfilled; we are fulfilling our mission of bringing about the Kingdom.

A few years ago, I met a woman in a hospital undergoing chemotherapy. She shared with me a powerful change in her life, one that touches upon the message in today’s Gospel. I asked her if I could mention her story someday, keeping her identity confidential; she agreed.

Mary (not her real name) was undergoing chemotherapy for stage four cancer. She lived about four blocks away from the hospital and would walk to her treatments. She was quite haggard and in a lot of pain most days.

Mary shared with me that she would cry as she walked to her chemotherapy, her anguish fomenting

from the fear of the treatment itself. And she would continue shedding her tears as she headed home after her treatment, the sadness then a combination of feeling awful both emotionally and physically.

One day, while walking home past a restaurant after her ninth chemo treatment, she passed a young and gaunt homeless man begging by a restaurant. She had seen him a few times before; however, in trying to manage her own pain and suffering--she acknowledged to herself with a little guilt--she really had not paid him a lot of attention.

He was sitting along an outside wall of the restaurant with his back to the wall and his legs bent so that his knees were scrunched up, pointing to the sky. His bare hands were in his lap, fingers laced together. And he was quietly snoring. The young man did not verbally ask for food; he displayed a sign requesting it. She did note that this time he seemed far thinner; he also looked very cold.

Mary had brought some crackers with her from her treatment. She placed what she had near his hands. After taking a few steps toward her home, Mary looked back. And without even thinking about it, took off her scarf and placed it around his hands and the crackers.

And she felt a little better.

She went home and began to pray for the young man.

When she went back to the hospital for her next treatment, the young man was no longer there. She inquired as to his whereabouts from a restaurant employee. The woman she spoke with said that she had not seen the young man in awhile, but, that Mary might find him in the homeless shelter a few blocks away.

Walking the extra few blocks was too much for Mary after her chemotherapy. Or so she thought. Once again without thinking about it, she found herself, exhausted and nauseous, walking up the steps of the shelter. She walked in and sat down on the first chair she could find. And then she saw her young man come in, looking a little better, wearing her scarf. Seeing that he was alright, she closed her eyes, the exhaustion of her efforts taking over her weakened body.

When she opened her eyes a few minute later, he was sitting by her. Once they made eye contact, he asked her if she was okay. Mary nodded. He said that she looked like she had had a tough day.

She began to cry. He reached out and took her hand, waited until she finished crying, got up and gave her a few Kleenexes. Mary said thank you to this young man. And he said, “No, thank you. And thank you for the scarf.”

What Jesus was trying to help us with is that, whether we are or are not well, our calling is to serve.

And when we serve, we physically, emotionally and spiritually aid ourselves in feeling better, feeling more alive. More importantly however, is that we are helping others.

We, like the Apostles, become the instruments of our Lord, in helping the bringing about of the Kingdom of God. Not a Kingdom where we are princes and princesses, finding fulfilment in ruling; instead, a Kingdom where we are children of God, finding fulfillment in serving others.

“It’s not about me; it’s about you.”

Chris Duffy, S.J.