

Homily - Sunday 26C

(Today's homily is a bit on the intellectual side, so if that's not your thing on a Sunday morning, then feel free to tune out and pray your own prayers or think your own thoughts.)

Today's readings give us an opportunity to reflect on a couple of key principles of Catholic Social Teaching. First, a wee bit of history. Catholic social teaching is a relatively modern phenomenon. It began as a response to mass industrialization in the mid-19th century, when the labour market was largely unregulated and the exploitation of workers – including young children – was an urgent social problem. The rebuke of the prophet Amos, in the first reading, was aimed at the merchants of his time, but it could equally apply to a Victorian factory-owner or workhouse foreman. The social conditions may be different, but the moral issue was essentially the same, namely, putting profit over people.

In formulating a response to the problems thrown up by industrialization and urbanization, the Church was beaten to the punch by a certain Karl Marx. Surveying the social and political conditions of Victorian England, Marx concluded that the only solution to the exploitation of the working class was the violent overthrow of the ownership class and the establishment of universal communism. It's easy to see why his message appealed to workers who had been disempowered by those early and brutal forms of capitalism. But the Church saw that Marx's message was ultimately a rejection of God and a debasement of the human person. Church leaders therefore had a job to do. They had to bring a timeless message to bear on new social and economic realities, and counter the false Gospel of Marxism with the true Gospel of Christ. This led in time to the birth of Catholic Social Teaching.

Today, I would like to call to mind two key principles of Catholic Social Teaching, principles which are implicit in today's Gospel passage. The first principle is the universal destination of goods. The universal destination of goods means that the riches bestowed on our planet by God the Creator are supposed to be enjoyed by all God's children – not just a few of them, not just the most powerful, or, to use a word Jesus uses in the Gospel, the most "astute" among them. This principle is quite broad in its application. For example: in terms of natural resources, Africa is fabulously rich; and yet, relatively few of Africa's children have profited from the continent's natural wealth. Or again: our planet produces enough food to feed the human race many times over; and yet, many people still go hungry. These, and similar scandals, are offences against God, who intended creation's goods to be enjoyed by everyone.

The second principle is private property. The right to property is rooted in the dignity of the human person. It safeguards against the exploitation of the weak by the powerful and the individual by the state. But push it too far, and it comes into conflict with the first principle, the universal destination of goods. How so? Well, if earth's goods are meant to be for everyone, you can't also have the right to acquire as many of those goods as possible, simply for your own enjoyment. The universal destination of goods therefore sets certain ethical limits on the right to private property. It sets obligations on how goods are to be used by their legitimate owners. That applies equally to private individuals and large multinationals.

These ideas are brought together in the idea of stewardship, which Jesus references in today's Gospel passage. What is a steward? Someone who takes care of things that are not, in the final analysis, his own. Today's Gospel passage is challenging us to see our own property and our own

money in precisely that way. And in societies such as ours, that's a pretty big challenge! After all, Western economies are built, to a large extent, on the notion of property rights. Jesus is not advocating, as Karl Marx did, for upheaval and revolution, but he is inviting us to a change of perspective. Through this idea of stewardship, he's trying to teach us that private ownership is ultimately just a holding-on-trust. We will one day have to give an account of how we have used our Master's goods, goods which he destined in the act of creation for all his children. Have we been wasteful with what has been entrusted to us, like the steward in Jesus's story? Or have we used the goods entrusted to us to win friends among the poor and needy, friends who will speak in our favour when the day of reckoning finally comes? That's the question raised by the Gospel passage today.

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