

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was about 11 years old, I needed to go into hospital for a very minor operation. It was quite a big thing for me to be away from home, in a strange environment – it was Kings College Hospital in London.

The day before my operation was a Sunday, and so I went into the chapel at the hospital and my eye was immediately caught by the stained glass window above the altar. I can't remember the picture, but I have always remembered the words.

Can any one guess what the words might have been – they were some words from today's gospel reading?

They were the words: ***“In as much as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me.”***

Those words have always spoken to me of the way in which Jesus calls us to care for everyone in need – just as we would care for him.

In the picture story that we heard in our Gospel reading today, the two basic rules that Jesus gives us are brought together.

Jesus said we must love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength.

And that we must love our neighbours as ourselves.

We can express our love for God in a number of ways. Through prayer – through our times of worship here together in church – as we sing songs together, expressing our praise and thanks to God for his love.

But the most important way that we show our commitment to him, our love for him, is by loving and caring for those around us.

Loving God and loving others goes hand in hand – you can't truly do one without the other.

That picture story from our Gospel today, has inspired followers of Jesus right through the ages to devote their lives to caring for those in need

- It might be through working as a doctor or a nurse – to care for those who are sick.
- It might be through working as a volunteer with Shelter, which is a charity working mainly in cities up and down our country, giving homeless people somewhere to sleep and food to eat on cold winter nights.
- It might be working with a charity like Christian Aid, which is helping villages in Africa to dig wells, so that the people there have got fresh water supplies.
- It might be responding to God's call to come and serve him as a member of a religious community, as many from around the world have done.
- It might be training to work as a Prison Chaplain, to help prisoners to find new meaning and direction in their lives and to turn away from the things that led them into crime.
- It might be responding to appeals like Children in Need – raising funds for projects working with children and young people up and down the country –

although they are strangers – people recognise the basic needs and want to do something to help – the same has been true in the way in which people have helped to raise money to help those affected by natural disasters when they occur in different parts of the world.

Many people have in different ways tried to live out the commands and teaching of Jesus.

One person who has inspired millions with her commitment to living out the example and teaching of Jesus, is Mother Teresa. She devoted her life to working amongst the poor of Calcutta – the hungry and thirsty, the homeless and naked, the lonely and the sick. She put the words of Jesus into practice in a very real and meaningful way.

She said something very important though, which helps us to think about ways that we can put his words into practice too, each and every day.

Mother Teresa said:

**Many today are starving for ordinary bread.
But there is another kind of hunger –
The hunger to be wanted, to be loved, to be
recognised.**

**Nakedness too, is not just the want of clothes,
But also about the loss of dignity, purity and self-
respect.**

**And homelessness is not just want of a house;
There is the homelessness of being rejected,
Of being unwanted in a throwaway society.**

**The biggest disease in the world today is the feeling
of being unwanted and uncared for. The greatest evil
is the lack of love, the terrible indifference towards
one's neighbour.”**

Quite profound words.

With those words in mind, the parable that Jesus told could have read something like this:

Then the king will say to those on his right hand:

Come, you who have been blessed by my Father. For I was **hungry** for a smile, and you gave it to me. I was hungry for a word of encouragement, and you praised me. I was hungry for a word of appreciation and you thanked me.

I was **thirsty** for a word of recognition and you took notice of me. I was thirsty for a word of friendship and you wrote me a letter. I was thirsty for a little companionship, and you stopped to chat with me.

I was a **stranger** and you made me feel welcome. I was from a very different background to you, but your acceptance built me up.

I was **naked** for want of self-esteem, and you clothed me with self-worth. I was stripped of self-confidence, and you dressed me in a cloak of confidence. I was naked because of the loss of my good name through things said about me that were untrue, and you clothed me in the garment of truth.

I was **sick** with doubt and worry, and in your cheerful attitude you lifted my spirits. I was wounded by failure and disappointment, but by your supportive attitude you healed me. I was in the pit of despair, but through your patient attitude you gave me hope.

I was a **prisoner** of nerves, and though your attitude of calm, you set me free. I was a prisoner of loneliness, but through your friendship, you released. I was a prisoner of guilt, and through your forgiveness you broke the chains of my guilt.

I was **homeless** for want of tenderness and affection and you embraced me. I was homeless for want of sympathy and understanding and you listened to me. I was homeless for want of love and acceptance, and you took me into your heart.

Christ's words again: ***"In as much as you did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me."***

Jesus calls us to respond to his call to care for those in need today, just as he did his first disciples.

As followers of Christ today, we have a responsibility to live according to the values of his kingdom.

The message of today's Gospel is clear – our allegiance to Christ cannot be shown in words of praise alone, but must be shown through acts of love.

Each and every time we share communion - we are reminded of the depth of God's love made known to us in Christ. His ongoing presence with us is somehow made real and tangible in the bread and wine that we share in remembrance of him. We take something of that love into ourselves, to strengthen us in his service.

In our prayers, we express our longing for the love of Christ to make a difference in our lives and in the life of the world. We pray that the values of Christ's Kingdom might break through into the brokenness of our world to bring peace, an end to suffering and healing wherever there is pain and hurt.

Our Gospel reading today, those words of Mother Teresa, remind us that as we make our prayers to God, we may need to be ready to be part his answer.

I would like to end by sharing with you an ancient prayer, known as the Grail prayer – it is a prayer that we can make our own today as we affirm our allegiance to Christ our King, and recommit ourselves to his love and service.

The Grail Prayer

Lord Jesus, I give you my hands to do your work,
I give you my feet to go your way,
I give you my eyes to see as you do,
I give you my tongue to speak your words,
I give you my mind, Lord, that you may think in me,
I give you my spirit, that you may pray in me.

Above all Lord, I give you my heart,
That you may love in me your Father and all humankind;
I give you my whole self that you may grow in me,
So that it is you, Lord Jesus,
Who live and work and pray in me.

Lord Jesus, I give you my spirit,
That you may pray in me,
I give you my heart, Lord,
That you may love in me,
Pray in me, love in me. Amen.