

We Are the Sum Total of Our Moral Acts
30th Sunday, Year A
Matthew 22: 34-40
23 October 2011

In recent years I have got out of the habit of watching the 6 o'clock news. But when I do an analytic part of me assesses what is being served up to the viewing public. The formula that is being used is of a fixed number of stories that tend to end up with a human-interest story. The stories that will get maximum attention are the ones with a high emotion, strong personal touch content. So the apparently stupid and intrusive journalist question, "How are you feeling," is the point of the exercise. The floods of tears or howls of rage that it might elicit will entertain us, and we will rise to our dinner table feeling a strong sense of emotional connection with what we have seen. What we are highly unlikely to get is a searching analysis of the underlying trends of the major news stories of our world. So we are not given the tools to understand and do something effective about what is going wrong around us. Instead we get news as infotainment that insulates and diverts us away from the hard realities of the world.

But journalists and news editors aren't alone in putting feelings first. All sorts of worthy institutions and moral improvement groups are getting people together to tell their stories and share their pain as a way of overcoming conflict. The idea is that as we become more sensitive to the sufferings of others we will become more likely to behave in responsible and kind ways.

But there is a problem with this emphasis on empathy. Apparently, while it might make us more internally anguished about the results of our actions it is unlikely to alter what we chose to do, especially when self-interest is at stake. And it can lead to unfair outcomes. As Jesse Prinz points out, "it influences people to care more about cute victims than ugly victims...It subverts justice; juries give lighter sentences to defendants that show sadness."

So if empathy is such an unreliable guide to effective moral action how then are we to set about loving the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind...and our neighbour as ourself, which as we heard this morning is the heart of our religion?

We might start by considering what kind of love is being recommended here. St Thomas Aquinas defined love as seeking the best interests of others. That requires at times standing outside our own needs and desires *Vis a Vis* the people we interact with so as to do what is best for them in the long run. And sometimes this judicious and considered approach to relationships involves not just self-denial, but also the ability to say no to people who pull on our

heartstrings. Tough love for wayward children isn't just a modern invention.

But how might we become the kind of people who can love in that kind of a way? Thomas argued that we should base our lives on the four cardinal virtues – justice, wisdom (or prudence), courage (or fortitude), and moderation (or self control or temperance). These are the hinges on which we can construct the good life.

We build these four virtues of justice, wisdom, courage and moderation into our lives by cultivating good habits that shape our instinctive reactions to certain situations in helpful ways. Thomas had seen a truth about how human beings operate in their aspiration to become a good and loving person. It is not so much a matter of occasional heroic moral choices, but rather of a thousand small decisions in the dull days of ordinary living. As we respond immediately without much reflection what will make us chose well will be well-trained habitual responses. This is why soldiers are trained in certain battle and survival drills that will kick in as a second nature response even when all about them is chaos and confusion.

Becoming a loving Christian person isn't just a self-help, self-improvement project. As we proceed along the way of habitually operating in unselfish ways out of love for God and others, God adds to justice, wisdom, courage, and moderation the three theological virtues of faith hope and love. They become the motivating factors for why we do what we do. They also add a fresh perspective on our life with others. We are not just trying to become a good person so as to enjoy delicious moral emotions. We are in fact embedded in our life with other believers because the life of God has taken root in our community life in such a way that we on the way to becoming the extended family of God. And of course the Holy Spirit infuses his strength and inspiration into us so as to motivate us into becoming wise, persevering, just and self controlled people.

Thomas puts all this in such a positive light that it comes across as being very doable, but then that is Thomas Aquinas for you – he is optimistic about people. Yet at the same time there is an unflinching assessment of human beings that underlies all this.

There are apparently four different kinds of people in this world, four different kinds of moral agents. There are the virtuous, who see what is the good and loving thing to do in each situation, and who delight to do it. They're moral training if you like has been so thorough, and so internally assimilated, that they do the right thing right away, even if it is at personal disadvantage because they can see that this is part of God's loving and wise personal provision for their life, and for human happiness.

Then there are the self-controlled. They do the right and loving thing, even though at times they are internally conflicted about it, experiencing a tug of war between the temptation they want to give way to and the ethical requirements of the good life. But in the end they stick to their guns, and behave in a prudent and self-controlled manner.

Next there are the weak, or as they are crushingly called, the incontinent. They know what is the right thing, but they often give way to temptation. They repent of their moral failures, and resolve to do better next time, but backsliding and setbacks often characterise their walk with God.

Last, there are the vicious, who are relentlessly oriented to the short term, selfish and sinful options. You can count on them to choose the bad in most situations.

We might like to think about where we fit in this moral scheme of things. Most of us I suppose are at either the second or third place. But it is the follow on analysis that is the most disturbing conclusion for us to take on board. Thomas believes that we are the sum total of our moral acts. What we do defines who we are. Forget about the internal anguish and hand wringing that went on around our choices. What counts is what we finally ended up doing. By that we, and others, can know what kind of moral agents we are. And that is who we really are. Forget about discovering your inner child, or your left-brain creativity. Your day-by-day choices along the plot lines of being either virtuous or vicious, or weak or self controlled, reveal the true story of our real identity.

And that is the last point I leave you with. Even though the training in virtue given us by our parents and mentors are an essential help, even though the Holy Spirit can and will infuse us with his motivating energy, in the end it is up to us to exert moral effort so as to become the kind of moral agents who will love God with all our heart, and soul, and mind...and our neighbour as ourselves. There is no substitute for the kind of will power and intestinal fortitude required to do and be all that.