



Why do we marginalise people?

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‘We must not make a beggar an obstacle to our generosity’ – Dalai Lama.

Do we ever stop to consider how much we marginalise even more the already marginalised?

For the past five years, I have given talks on homelessness, both physical and spiritual, here there and everywhere – each time without fail, someone asks me afterwards when we have a general discussion, how they should cope with the problem of giving money to beggars. Every single time I hear the remark: ‘I don’t want them spending my money on drink.’ I have also heard this from many other quarters too. It’s an issue I mull over a great deal.

The truth is that I never answer what I really want to answer for fear of coming over as sanctimonious. I generally get round it somehow, but I always stress the importance of actually having an intelligent conversation with the person who is begging, and not just throw a few coins at him as if he were an inanimate object. People who throw coins in fountains in Italy stop to admire the beauty of the flowing water. There is considerably more beauty in a human being, even if he is filthy and smelly – Christ is there too, every time.

Recently, I came across this quotation by the Dalai Lama and I felt guilty that I had not, so far, said what I deeply feel for fear of losing face. Basically my feelings on the subject fall into two categories, the first being this: Christ gave himself totally and unquestioningly for us. He did not have reservations nor did He say ‘I’ll do this for some people but not for those who decide to follow another path.’ He became Man; He suffered and died in order to give each and every one of us a chance. He never marginalised anyone by His words or actions – on the contrary He gave His all in order to bring everyone in from the edges towards a central unit of inclusion. His ideal is that no one should be excluded and that we should never exclude one another.

In His total and unquestioning giving of self to us He is showing us the true Christian spirit: that true giving is unconditional and unquestioning – If giving has strings attached, it is not in keeping with the teachings of Christ. He said ‘love one another as I have loved you.’ He did not say: ‘pick and choose whom to love, then do your best for those select few.’ We are commanded to love everyone – No one said we have to like everyone; but to give Christian love is on another level to daily petty likes and dislikes. Christ gives of Himself in the mess of life – the paralytic for whom the roof was battered in order to get him near the Lord, would not have been combed and scented as Tony Blair was when meeting the Pope. They would all, the Lord included, have been covered in plaster, dust and dirt – probably coughing and spluttering! So if you are going to give to someone dirty and coughing, look into his eyes and feel the Lord saying to you ‘who do you see when you’re looking at me?’ and consider all your inner brokenness you have the choice to hide, and feel the Lord within you asking the beggar the same question: ‘who do you see when you’re looking at me?’ The Lord produced His most sacred and moving moments in the worst mess of life.

The second point I mull over in all this is: why should affluence give you the right to drink and being marginalised deny you any such right? When my husband worked in industry, it was considered perfectly normal for the companies to treat their employees at Christmas etc to parties where alcohol flowed freely. Rooms at the hotel were booked for people who would be over the limit and need to stay until fit to drive. Such practices happen all the time and thousands of pounds are spent on alcohol for people who can afford to buy their own! Yet a lonely, cold, unhappy person whose life is a visible mess must not be allowed the same comforts as the person who is walking past him? In the words of many a client ‘I can’t get my head around that!’

Generosity is demanded of us as Christians – making obstacles to that generosity is not. Picking and choosing is not. Marginalising the already marginalised is not just unchristian; it is turning the teachings of Christ upside down because it is saying that affluence reigns, that those who have are the important ones, materialism is God, receiving is not for giving.

Afterthought: If you are in town on a Saturday night, who are the truly drunk and rowdy, the affluent young folk or the people you gave a quid to earlier? Have you ever glanced at how much money there is in the beggar’s hat? When did you last pay for a drink?!!

“So where He is, God is active, pouring out His gift, inviting our response. And this means we can’t fully know who God is and what God gives unless we are willing to stand in the same place as Jesus, in the full flood of the divine life poured out in mercy and renewal.” – Archbishop Rowan Williams, - part of his enthronement sermon.