

Practical Mercy

Feed the Hungry, Give Drink to the Thirsty

Since our early childhood, we were used to hearing these verses, either in church or in our homes:

"Then the king (our Lord Jesus) will say to those on his right hand, Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Mt 25:34-36).

From these verses we learn at least two lessons:

First, to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty and to help the needy are commandments of Jesus Christ.

Second, they are not just commandments, but our eternal salvation hangs on applying them; we are in danger of perdition in case we neglect them. This is evident from what follows, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink" (Mt 25:41-42).

So the gospel declares that feeding and giving drink to Jesus Christ means helping the needy; that is, you have to offer help to any human being in need of help, and also show mercy to any humble creature in need of mercy. Or as our Lord puts it, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me" (Matthew 25: 45), because our Lord "looks upon the lowly" as we say in the

Coptic liturgy of St Basil (Cf. Ps 112 (113):6), and "He comforts the downcast" as St Paul says (2Cor 7: 6).

We read in the *Desert Fathers* of a monk called Serapion who went to Alexandria and found there in the market place a poor naked man, so he thought it over, "Does it make sense that I, being a monk, am clothed, while this poor man remains naked. Certainly this *is* Christ suffering cold weather." Immediately he courageously put off his garment and gave it to the poor man, and sat down naked with a Bible in his hand. And it happened that an official passed by and seeing the naked monk he asked him "Abba Serapion, who stripped you?" He pointed to the Bible and said, "This is the one who stripped me." And after the official had clothed him he departed. Then Abba Serapion found a captured man accused of a loan. As he had nothing to give him, he sold his Bible and paid to the creditor. Next, he found another poor man; he gave him his garment and went to the monastery naked. Then his disciple asked him, "Master, where is your garment?" He answered, "I sent it forward where we will need it." He then asked him, "Where is the Bible which used to comfort us?" He answered, "My son, the Bible used to tell me every day, Sell what you have and give it to the poor" (Systematic Collection, VI 6, Arabic 254).

I remember after the eruption of the Egyptian revolution on twentieth fifth of January 2011 many prisoners escaped from their jails, and hundreds of them tried to seek refuge in our monastery of Saint Macarius, because there are many prisons near us. They climbed the walls of the monastery without knowing what this building was, and they were afraid lest we should deliver them to the government. When they saw us, and discovered that it is a monastery, they asked us, "Is this the monastery of father John?" (Father John is one of the elders of our monastery who was responsible for the guesthouse), then they became calm and said "father John

used to visit us every year in the prison to give to every one of us a watermelon on the month of August, the very hot season in Egypt”. Then we gave them food and water, and they departed in peace. It was a very tiny gift from the monastery at the hands of father John to some people who are rejected by society, but it was a gift to Jesus Christ who ordered us to help the needy.

Such small practical acts of charity are of great value in the sight of God. Without them our religion remains in the realm of abstractions. “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food if one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? (Jam 2:15-16).

It is these small works that make the love of God to be “perfected” in us (1 Jo 4:12), and without them the love of God cannot dwell in us “whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God dwell in him?” (1 Jo 3:17)

Someone may say "we have to help the poor who belongs to us", but from the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus Christ taught us to help anyone, even if he is alien to us.

I will end my speech with another story from the Desert Fathers. An Egyptian monk had a nice garment which he gave to a poor man. Later while the monk was passing through the town, he saw a harlot wearing that garment, so he became very sad. Then an angel appeared to him and said "do not be sad because a harlot had put on your garment; for from the very moment you gave it to the poor man, Jesus Christ put it on" (An. 358, Arabic 887).

That is why our Lord said, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' (Matthew 25: 40).

Bishop Epiphanius