

23rd Sunday of Year B: Curing ‘deafness’ – especially to others’ feelings.

First Reading: Isaiah 35:4-7a: God’s great future for all – sick included;

Second Reading: James 2:1-3: Unfair judgement, caused by snobbery;

Gospel: Mark 7:31-37: Jesus’ crude healing of the deaf-mute.

As a young boy (1950’s) attending St Aidan’s, Willington Quay (between Wallsend & North Shields), I remember “door-pence” – basically, cash to get into church (and after Mass, to get out of it!). In some places, better seats were railed-off, and to use these, you had to pay twice as much as when using the ‘poorer’ seats. (I have a feeling that St Mary’s Cathedral in Newcastle did this in the 19th century.) Why? Many parishes were burdened with huge debts – usually, historic ones for schools, the church itself, etc - often pre-dating World War I. As a student, I travelled in the late 1960’s from Durham to Newcastle, and British Rail had one day got a social conscience: they had renamed “2nd Class” as “Standard Class”. (Mind, the seats were still the same....)

Behind this nostalgia lies an important question: are ALL distinctions between people “unchristian”, and therefore sinful? The issue is raised in St James’ Letter – this Sunday’s 2nd reading. He discusses the practice in some synagogues - which Christians still attended - where the poor were put on the floor, while the rich were shown the “best seats”. The St James reference is in the author’s usual knockabout style, which is hardly subtle. Clearly, treating the less well-dressed as crudely as he mentions is morally wrong, and that scarcely needs saying. But when it comes to organizing education, prioritizing health services, and so on, then (I suggest) things are less clear.

I was involved in the ding-dong battles over the comprehensive reorganization of Newcastle RC schools in the 1970’s. It was a long time (nearly 50 years) ago, but the fears, disputes and acrimony still feel fresh to me! Once the diocese had decided that we had to change over, the first question was: two-tier (like Newcastle) or three-tier (like Northumberland)? The diocese opted for the latter, and the secondary modern schools were happy with this, as they would become the middle (9-13) schools. But a group of parents objected, and persuaded the diocese to opt for two-tier instead. The arguments were: (a) the lower baptismal numbers would make the 4-9 schools too small and (b) many parents would not support the middle schools with their proposed staffing. Once the 11-18 schools were set up, it was huge challenge to keep the systems for those already at secondary level, while establishing a new educational style for the 11 year-olds just starting. It was obvious (to us) that we had to distinguish between children of different abilities and treat them separately (to

the annoyance of some Newcastle politicians!) – because their needs were different. We felt then (and much of the education world later accepted) that it was wrong to have a “one size fits all” system, where no-one could develop at their own speed, with frustrated children wanting to disrupt lessons.

What about health issues? While our NHS is based on the idea of equal availability for all, what should happen if someone refuses to co-operate with their doctors? Should very heavy people who refuse to lose weight have orthopaedic surgery? Should alcoholics who cannot (or will not) give up drink have the chance of a second liver transplant? I do not have the answer to these questions, but they have a moral side to them.

I think that this moral aspect is linked with our attitude and intention. The basic fact is that we cannot do everything for everybody. However, if we see people as individuals with needs, just as Jesus suggested in Matthew 25 (“*Whatsoever you do for the least of my brethren, that you do for me...*”) then the decisions we need to make will be morally acceptable. By treating different types of people differently, but respectfully – based on their needs and our resources, not on our prejudices - then we should be morally in the clear. However, if we show contempt, and treat people with scorn (as in the 2nd reading), then we break the law of love. But we need patience & self-control not to over-react, when faced with hypochondriacs who effectively abuse the health service, or when dealing with parents utterly uninterested in their children’s education, with those same children spoiling others’ progress in class..

Where does this leave us? I often think of Jesus’ words “*Judge not, and you will not be judged.*” (Matthew 7:1). The problem is that often we cannot help ‘judging’! We warn young people about whom to trust or not to trust, for their own safety. (The diocese does this with us on safeguarding grounds, and ‘names names’.) A lot depends on motivation. If it is just gossip, or passing nasty comments for their own sake, then it is unacceptable. But sometimes, for others’ safety, or the general good, we must pass on information & opinions about people. When we are deciding on educational systems, health care, or people’s suitability for jobs, hard choices must sometimes be made. This is not un-charity or snobbery, but common-sense; our consciences must accept that.

Fr Jim Dunne.

