

Twelfth Talk

EMPTYING ONESELF FOR GOD

The seeker of truth approached the holy one and said to him, "Tell me the answer to the great spiritual question: 'Is there life after death?' " The holy one looked at him and said, "My friend, the greatest spiritual question of them all is not if there is life after death. The greatest spiritual question is, 'Is there life before death?' " Fr. Tony D'Mello used to speak jokingly about "old in 1930, died in 1960, buried in 1999!" What he was saying was that for much of our lives we are dead. Joan Chichester says that charism is a living passion of whatever dimension of the life of Christ that is missing now, here where we are. The truth is that since charisms are the saving mysteries of the life of Christ for the Church, they never die. However the problem is that they can die in us if we refuse them, if we rigidify them. They can die if we refuse to give them away, if we hold them and suffocate them. A Buddhist monk said: "The great miracle is not walking on water. The great miracle is walking on earth. What he means is to be fully alive to what is happening in our world.

This morning we prayed for the grace to see this world with the heart, the eyes, the gaze and the passion of a prophet, so that we may be able to respond to it. Yesterday we spoke about emptying ourselves and creating space. We know that the great emptier was Jesus. He emptied himself not just of his divinity but - as Colm Keating used to say - Jesus emptied himself of the excuses we so often make to keep ourselves safe from involvement. He emptied himself of the common temptation to hide his feelings and to seek protection in isolating himself from the crucial issues of his time. He emptied himself of a compromising obedience towards the religious leaders with whom he had fundamental differences and disagreements. He emptied himself of a slavish practice of keeping rituals and laws that made strict religious observance more important than the means and the life experiences of the people. He emptied himself of patriarchal ways of dealing with people - power, domination, manipulation, control. He emptied himself of hierarchical ways of relating to people in the rank-ordered and status conscious society of his time. Then men had more value than women, male children more value than female, children more value than slaves, Israelites more value than Samaritans and Gentiles.

The whole question of emptying oneself is so huge. That is general. What about the specific fears and specific prejudices that I have? How do I empty myself? I believe that one of the great ways of

emptying oneself is focusing on the other, whether the other is God or my neighbour. My neighbour can be - and often is - the presence of God. When I do that I am ready for ministry. I believe that this is fundamental. I am never too old for this. If my leadership, my ministry, my community, my prayer, my relating, comes between the poor and me, I need to question it. The centre of Christianity is the poor. One-third of Indians go to bed hungry every night. This is a statistic. I was able to put a face on that state recently. There is woman who works in the Province centre in Delhi, a single mother, chirpy and vibrant. One day, when I noticed that she was not as full of life as usual, I asked her if anything was wrong. She told me that she was upset about what had happened the previous night. When she was putting her two young sons to sleep, the younger said that he was hungry and wanted to eat something. There was no food in the house. So the mother slapped him and he went off to sleep crying. She said she was feeling bad for having done so. After that incident, the statistic that one-third of the people in India go to bed hungry every night meant something to me.

What is the response? What does a disciple of Jesus do in a situation like that? He cannot feed everyone. Neither can the disciple of Jesus remain silent. I think that is the challenge for each of us here - to protest. We are never too old to protest. The protest is the fundamental Christian stance against the injustices of society. It is sad to see a Church that collaborates with the dominant culture. I see that too often and I know that I myself am guilty of that. The question has come up time and again: How do we, as Congregation Leadership Team in Rome, speak to our Church leadership and tell them that things are not as they should be. We took the bit between the teeth in May, when we called together a meeting of superiors general of English speaking Brothers' Congregations to talk about some of the things happening in our Church that make us feel uncomfortable. In November of this year there is a Congress on religious life attended by people from around the world. We are hoping that a small group of us as Brothers may be able to say something that could make a difference.

I mention that because it is the only way we can live fully this prophetic call to which every one of us is invited. It is demanded of us. You and I are responsible for our brothers and sisters. Age is not an excuse. We can all write letters and talk about it. We need to do that. As you go off for your reflection, look at Mathew VIII: 1-17. Identify with the people. Remember that the Gospel is about discipleship, not about Jesus. How does a disciple act? Is there a passion that lies dormant somewhere inside me? Blow the coals and let the embers glow again. Feel the indignation that God would feel at the way people are treated in our world. Look at your own surroundings and ask yourself what you can do to identify with the people. Realise that in identification with them you

are going to be evangelised. Reach out your hand, as a leper reaches out his or her hand. You will be, like the centurion, asking Jesus to come and save your people, or like the sick woman waiting to get up and serve the Lord. Identify with the centurion's servant and with Peter's mother-in-law.

I end with this little story, which is adapted from Miguel Mac Kenna. A certain man became frustrated and depressed at the state of the world whenever he read the newspapers or tuned in to the media. One day, when he decided to go shopping in a nearby store, he was surprised to find Jesus behind the counter. He recognised Jesus from the pictures of him in the nearby Church. He spoke to Jesus and learned from him that he was the owner of the store and that he sold just about everything. The man was very pleased with that answer. So he walked through the aisles to see for himself. Having drawn up a shopping list, he brought it back to Jesus. He had asked for (1) peace on earth; (2) harmony between religions; (3) sufficient food and essential items of subsistence for all; (4) clean air and water. Jesus read the list, bent down behind the counter and handed the man a number of loom frames with an assortment of weaving threads of different colours. The man objected, insisting that he wanted the finished, ready-made products. Jesus replied, "*I supply only the raw materials. It is up to you to put them together.*"

What is the passion that moves me to be prophetic in my life?

How do I try to live this passion?

Can I recount an incident when this happened?