

The cry of the poor

Pat Marrin | Jul. 1, 2009 NCR Today



"The Lord hears the cry of the poor." Ps 34

Two stories in today's Lectionary readings--Hagar and the child Ishmael expelled into the desert (Gen 21), and the two demoniacs who confront Jesus (Matt 8)-- might have come from the morning news.

Visit <http://www.unhcr.org>, the home page of the United Nations High Command for Refugees, to get information on the millions of displaced, stateless, asylum-seeking, emigrating peoples around the globe.

Google the phrase "homeless and mentally ill" to find scores of sites like <http://anxietypanichealth.com> and to read a 2008 report on "the estimated 744,000 people who are homeless on any given night, 40 to 45 percent of them with a serious mental illness. Most of these mentally ill people go untreated, and unable to work, live a hand-to-mouth existence out on the streets."

Or if you live in any large or mid-sized American city, read your local paper or call city hall and ask about conditions on the street in your home town.

In Kansas City, Mo., thousands of people line up every day at various meal sites around town. It is hard to find a shelter bed as evening falls, and wooded areas, parks, under bridges, in doorways and cars, many bed down for the night.

At the local Catholic Worker House, a man named Thomas circles the property barking like a dog. A woman sits in the patio area rolling cigarettes, getting ready to push her shopping cart to the storefront up the street where she sleeps. She was recently featured in a newspaper article. Days later teenagers drove by the storefront and shot her in the face with a pellet gun.

Jesus might feel overwhelmed to step into today's world, if not by the type of human suffering he would find -- present in every period of history -- then by the range of disparity and the sheer numbers. In the 21st century, with advanced technology, medical science and an astonishing capacity to produce and deploy resources, hundreds of millions of people still struggle to survive in a world dislocated by war, economic dysfunction and political instability. At the same time, privileged populations in some nations and in the top tiers of economic advantage, live in once unimagined luxury, shielded from the suffering so prevalent ifor the rest of the human family.

The psalmist proclaims today, that "The Lord hears the cry of the poor." What does this mean? It surely means

that God sees and hears the plight of the poor in the world. Could it also mean that God is moving all of us to see and hear it as well, and to act to change it? Latin American Theologian Jon Sobrino quotes his brother Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuria, murdered by the army in 1989 at the university in San Salvador, as calling for the collective moral force to turn history in a different direction, away from the death trip it is on because so many people have been abandoned by the reigning capitalist model of economic development.

These are hard words and a massive challenge -- to change the *whole* system in order to avoid self-destruction. But how will we deal with the effects of the system, so evident all around us, like Lazarus the homeless man lying in the doorway, if we do not question the ideas that have created a world where such suffering is possible?

The Lord hears the cry of the poor, and the Lord's response is stirring within all of us.

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