

The readings during the season of Easter are different from the rest of the liturgical year. During the Easter season, the first reading is not from the Old Testament but from the Book of Acts. What the church is doing during the Easter season is recalling the birth of Christianity, bringing us back in time to the earliest days of the spread of the gospel after the resurrection of Jesus in the First Century. The entire Easter season is set aside for a remembrance made present of the life, death, resurrection, ascension and sending of Christ's Spirit to the world. Last week we looked at the discovery of the empty tomb on Sunday morning, but now we move to the next week after Jesus' resurrection.

Our readings today encourage us to reflect on two things. First, the fact that Jesus institutes the sacrament of mercy, the sacrament of confession. And then secondly, that in the early church, from the very beginning, Christians began not just to receive that mercy, but they also showed that mercy toward others, especially toward those who are poor and those who are in need, through almsgiving.

The first reading gives us a little window into what the church was like in First Century Jerusalem. I've heard too many commentators use this passage as a kind of biblical foundation for the political system known as socialism.

When it says everyone had everything in common and the wealthy would bring their money and lay it at the apostle's feet to give to those who had any need, it's describing acts of charity, these are acts of almsgiving.

Our Catechism (2424) has a short section that rejects the political systems known as socialism or communism. The Church rejects any political system that doesn't observe the right of the individual to private property and places the state over the rights of individuals.

In First Century Jerusalem, the apostles are not gathering the money, giving it to the Roman government and then having them dispense it as they will. Distribution to those who are needy is taking place within the church community itself. It doesn't involve any political system.

So this simply isn't about a political system, it's about the life of an early religious community. It's about a kind of radical poverty followed by some of the early Christians in Jerusalem, and by many religious communities today.

As Christians we are stewards of the Lord's goods. We don't have absolute ownership of our possessions. Everything the true Christian has is to be regarded as a good possessed in common with everyone else. All Christians should be ready and eager to come to the help of their neighbors in need.

We are stewards of God's possessions and we have a moral obligation to provide for those who are in need, to practice almsgiving, especially within the church community itself. Within the early church in Jerusalem this kind of radical poverty was something that was practiced very widely.

All Christians are called to the charity of almsgiving, which is very significant for this day because we are on the Second Sunday of Easter, also called Divine Mercy Sunday. And giving to those who are in need is one of the corporal works of mercy. It's an expression of mercy to give to those who are in need. So what the church is doing on this particular Sunday is, with this Gospel, giving us a window into the sacrament of mercy, the institute of confession.

And then with the reading from Acts, it's giving us a window into the corporal work of mercy through the giving of alms to those who are in need. So the whole thing kind of revolves around the theme of mercy. And if you have any doubts about that, did you hear the Psalm for the day? "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good... his mercy endures forever."

And the Hebrew word in that psalm for mercy is *hesed*. *Hesed* is a Hebrew word used for kindness or love. It is the devotion of people towards God as well as the love or mercy of God towards humanity. It is frequently used in the Psalms in the sense of the mercy of God towards humanity. It is traditionally translated "loving kindness" or "steadfast love." It also means a kind of charity that goes over and above what's required, especially to those who are in need.

Lots of Catholics today may think of almsgiving as writing a check to the church. But we are called to consider not only the needs of the church, but the needs of the poor, especially within our own community, our own parish, our own family.

How can I take the blessings that I've had, whether it be land or wealth, possessions or money, whatever it might be, and provide for those who are in need? And, in that way, make the mercy of God that he's shown to us in confession, something that we show to others through the act of almsgiving.

When we believe that Jesus is the Son of God and through this belief, we experience life in his name, the life we experience must be shared with our community. That's the deal. We share the life of Christ. We don't say "I pay my taxes, so now it's on the government to take care of others." No - as disciples of Jesus, it's on you and me to show God's mercy toward those in need. Whether it is the Interfaith Hospitality Network, the Community Pregnancy Center or next weekend's Catholic Relief Services collection. Remember this over the next weeks and months, when we will have a procession of Catholic charities asking for your help. Amen?

*With thanks to Brant Pitre.*

- Deacon Jack Schaefer