

Last week I mentioned the *anawim* – beloved of God, whose company the Lord Jesus preferred to that of the professionally pious – a Hebrew word meaning ‘those who are bowed down’... and it occurs in the Responsorial Psalm this weekend: ‘(the Lord) who raised up those who are bowed down.’ They are the poor, the unremarkable, the unnoticed, the small and insignificant, the powerless – and the world despises them, because the world worships at the altar of wealth, success, power, influence and – worst of all – ‘celebrity’. In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a beautiful youth who rejected all amorous advances until, one day, he caught sight of his own reflection in a pool of water and immediately fell in love with it, not realising it was himself. He stayed there forever, gazing at his own face, until he eventually died and became a white-and-yellow flower. This world is infatuated with its own image and it is consumed with desire for itself. It is a narcissistic world in which there is no place for ordinariness, smallness or unremarkability. The *anawim* are not wanted.

Yet all the readings today are about these little ones. Isaiah says to them: ‘Have courage, do not be afraid, because your God is coming to save you.’ If our life is bone-dry and bare like a desert, God will make water flow out from it like an unfailing stream, proclaims the prophet; if we are blind to all that is good and beautiful, he will give us back the ability to see it, even in the midst of suffering and shadow; if we cannot hear the eternal music sounding deep in the heart of creation, God will open our ears to it, even when we are surrounded by cries of hatred or despair. Isaiah addresses the *anawim* directly and promises them life and salvation.

The Responsorial Psalm is also directed to ‘those who are bowed down’: the hungry, the imprisoned, the physically disabled, the widow and orphan. And the deaf man with a speech impediment in today’s gospel – one of God’s *anawim*, to be sure – is healed by

the Lord Jesus in a living fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy set so wondrously to music by Handel: 'Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unsealed; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing.'

The second reading, from the letter of St James, shows us how we ourselves can be vessels to hold the promises of God to his little ones: through loving service; Jesus referred to himself time and time again as a servant, as one who serves. St James tells us that the same path beckons to each one of us. Service is the act of doing something for someone else rather than for oneself; and doing something for someone else rather than for oneself is an *opus amoris*, a work of love. Service and love are inseparable – one is a channel of the other. Service that is not done in love is meaningless. The Lord Jesus is our exemplar because everything he ever said or did in his entire life was done not for himself. There are many ways to serve because there are many ways to do something for another person and not oneself. The more we serve, the more we discover love within ourselves, even when we might have thought that no love was there. Mahatma Gandhi said: 'The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others'. It doesn't matter how insignificant our service may seem to be – even just holding open a door for someone. St François de Sales said: 'There is nothing small in the service of God.' And St Thérèse of Lisieux said: 'Even if you pick up a pin for no other reason than the love of God, it is a great act.'

It doesn't have to be material: there are many *anawim* in the world whose deepest poverty is not monetary and whose greatest need is for loving kindness. It can be a smile, a brief hello, saying something kind when you're not actually obliged to. These things may sound insignificant, but they really aren't. They can make the difference between a good day and a bad day for many people, even though neither you nor they are aware of it. A Jewish spiritual writer

once said: “Service has a life of its own. A single act of kindness may have a long trajectory and touch those we will never meet or see. Something that we casually offer may move through a web of connection far beyond ourselves to have effects that we may have never imagined.”

Because it is an instrument of love, service ultimately transforms us; Buddha said: ‘If you light a lamp for someone else, it will also illuminate your own path.’ Service is always a journey of equals: the one who serves is not superior to the one who needs service – if anything, it is the other way round. The gift from the one who is served is far greater than the service given: it is the opportunity to love. This is why God calls his children in need ‘those who are bowed down’. The psalmist says:

- ‘The *anawim* will not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the afflicted perish forever’ (9:18)