

Travelers

We have all been in the position of Elisha in today's first reading. Maybe not recently, but at one time or another we've all been travelers, far from home, needing a meal or a place to stay, dependent on the kindness of strangers. It's not that we do not have money and credit cards to pay people for their hospitality to us, but where to spend it? Where to eat? Where to sleep? And when we are on the road, having to pay for everything, to be offered food and lodging by friend or relative, with no thought of repayment, can seem like the most touching act of the purest generosity. What we can so easily take for granted at home, when offered to us gratuitously on the road, can inspire the profoundest gratitude.

Twenty years ago now when I was traveling through Europe before starting a summer improving my German in Austria, I spent a couple of days in Paris. While there, I attended an early morning daily mass in one of the side chapels at the cathedral of Notre Dame. This was when Notre Dame was still standing of course. Who could have imagined a 700 year old cathedral going up in smoke? I went in part because going to Mass in a foreign place gives me a taste of home, a feeling of being at home, however distant I may be. I recommend it. In any case, this early morning mass offered for a couple dozen tourists like myself, under the stone cool, cavernous vault of Notre Dame, was celebrated by a frail old bishop, assisted by a deferential, young seminarian. The Gospel reading happened to be today's, and the aged bishop took the occasion to relate a story from his prime, when he was a young curé, leading a group of pilgrims to Lourdes. He was taking them to the baths where the ill and the crippled could immerse themselves in the hope of a miracle. Now the day was hot, the sun bright, and the line interminable. However as he and his entourage waited in line a twelve year old girl moved slowly down the line towards them pulling a wagon behind her. On the wagon was a tub and she was offering to each pilgrim in line a cup of cool water. He said that fifty years later he could still remember how cool and refreshing that cup of water was. It was, said the old bishop, the most touching act of gratuitous, selfless generosity he had ever experienced. It was, he continued, his miracle from Lourdes, an unexpected revelation, inspiring wonder and gratitude. And it was only then, he concluded, that he really understood what Jesus had meant in saying today that whoever gives even a cup of cold water to a wandering disciple will not lose their reward.

Now the first part of today's Gospel may sound more harsh. In effect Jesus is warning us

that family life can be as self-absorbed and self-centered as any individual life, and that such familial narcissism can be just as stultifying, just as crippling to our spiritual life. God calls us to be welcoming, generous and hospitable, not only as individuals but as families. Our families also need to be outward looking, reaching out to neighbor and stranger, widow and orphan. And so too our parish family. And so we tithe as a parish, donating monthly to charities local and abroad.

If life is a journey then we are all travelers. And as travelers along life's way, we are called to imitate Christ, who welcomed one and all, neighbor and stranger, somebodies and nobodies, saints and sinners. For as Christ teaches us today, in welcoming the least among us, God too makes his home in ours.