

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God, Amen.

It seems that our society is moving more towards what is known as “identity politics,” where political opinion is formed from some aspect of our identity. Where we are from, our sex, our religion, our wealth, our history, our level of education, our job *define*, in this model, our outlook on the world. This is not necessarily a bad thing: who we are informs what policies we support and our Christian faith *should* be part of this; whichever political party, candidate or policy we vote for, or do not vote for, should be because of our faith in Christ.

Yet where these identity politics fall down is how we talk to, and how we listen to, others. How much of our contemporary media is full of politicians, commentators and journalists saying, “You are only saying that because ...”? “*You only want* tax cuts for the wealthy because you already earn a lot!” “*You only want* more money spent on schools because you have children!” “*You only want* to lift sanctions because your company will benefit from new contracts!”

These phrases, shockingly widespread, are not only unchristian but they are a logical fallacy: they hold little to no benefit to reason or logic. They start with the premise “You are wrong, and I will now explain why you are wrong.” Termed “Bulverisms” by C.S. Lewis in the middle of the last century, they have crept into our consciousness: “you must show *that* a man is wrong before you start explaining *why* he is wrong.” They are not, however, confined to the realm of politics, people try to apply them in religion too. “You are only Muslim because your family is from Pakistan!” “You’re only an atheist because you want to define your own moral standard!” “You only believe in God because you are scared of being alone!” These statements do nothing for an argument because *they fail* to recognise another perspective as having a valid position, *they fail* to engage with the other person, *they fail* to seek to understand another person. They simply try to dismiss another person’s point of view and reinforce my own bias and prejudice: in other words, they depersonalise another human person because they deny his reality.

What then, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, do we mean by a human person? We mean a unique and real human, made in God’s very image and after his likeness, who can glorify God in a distinctive manner. None can pray to God, praise God, honour God as can each of you. These Bulverisms, then, these “You only say that because ...” phrases, not only are logical fallacies but they deny the personhood of another human being. Whom do they depersonalise? Any to whom we would deny rights – the poor, the marginalised, the foreigner, the sick, the imprisoned, the weak, the unborn, the future generation, the political opponent, the follower of a different faith, the person of a different race, nation or culture – we deny rights and we deny a voice.

How much of our history has been spent denying another’s personhood? How much blood has been spilt, pain caused? How many families have been divided, peoples sent into exile, friendships shattered? Every war, every conflict, every political tension and uneasy truce, has had depersonalisation as a contributing factor.

Today marks the centenary of the Armistice signed at the end of the Great War, one hundred years since the most depersonalising war humanity had ever faced. It was the first modern war, the first to use tanks and the last to use cavalry, and was not man against man but man against machine, man against weapon. In a celebrated poem, Wilfred Owen contrasts the depersonalisation of modern warfare with the perception of those in their homes,

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,

Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood Come
gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum
est Pro patria mori.*

And even today, that echo of the Roman poet Horace continues, *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* – it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country – resounds in the heart of the public consciousness because it sees *ours* as a country of heroic and self-less persons whereas the *other* as depersonalised “enemies.” Yet the “war to end all wars” did nothing of the sort: warriors and civilians alike have faced a century of suffering because *another* has not given them the space to be human, the space to be a person.

The Lord, my brothers and sisters, takes then the ideal of a person and tells a parable. This is different from the other occasion where he is asked a similar question by a rich young man who truly wanted an answer to the question, “what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Christ, on that occasion, tries to guide the young man to keep the commandments and even more, “Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” Christ is acting pastorally and giving a word unto salvation to the man, but in today's Gospel he acts *differently* because he is dealing with a *different* man: he does not have one answer which is for all but responds to the needs of each, he is responding to a *person* and treats each man as such.

When you speak with another, when I speak, do we listen and pray? Do we act to honour the image of God before us? Do we listen to *respond* or listen to *understand*? Do we see a *person* in front of us?

And so the lawyer stands up. He has found a trick, a question which he thinks can catch out the Lord, and he uses it to test Christ. “Teacher,” he says almost mockingly, “what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” The Lord recognises the heart of the man yet does not dismiss the question because he can draw a greater teaching out for his disciples. So he lets the lawyer do the work: “What is written in the Law?” asks Christ, “How do you read?”

And the lawyer answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your

mind; and your neighbour as yourself.”

The lawyer clearly knows the answer, it is given by Christ himself in two other places in Scripture, yet does not understand it because he does not see the person before him. He sees a prophet perhaps, a teacher certainly, but does not recognise him as the Christ and so does not see the Lord to whom his love must be directed. He cannot see because he believes the one before whom he stands can be tricked and mocked rather than loved as himself.

What does it mean to “[love] your neighbour as yourself”? It does not mean to love your neighbour in the *same way* as we love ourselves: that is the path to narcissism and what the Fathers term “self-love.” To love your neighbour is the *very act* by which you can become yourself and it is to this which the Lord draws us. By relating to another, to God first of all and then to whomever I am with, I *discover myself* as a true person: not as a Lord but as a minister and servant. This the lawyer did not understand for he sees himself not as a servant of the other but as his master: he is surrounded by *people* yet he does not see *persons*.

“And who is my neighbour?” he asks, so as not to lose face: he digs himself deeper into his hole. And we come to the familiar parable. The journey from Jerusalem to Jericho is not too far, approximately eighteen miles, but it was a winding road with a huge descent: from Jerusalem’s two and a half thousand feet above sea level to Jericho’s eight hundred feet below there is well over a half-mile drop. The road itself was known as the “way of blood” because of the blood spilt there by robbers.

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead.” Do we, too, join this man in descending into this fallen world? Do we turn and walk up towards the heavenly Jerusalem where we may find shelter and protection? Do we forge armour for ourselves through prayer and communion that might protect us from robbers and demons? This man is hurt, we are hurt, but the Lord does not leave him, leave us, in this state. He knows we are in his image, we are persons, and will help us.

The man was passed by a priest and by a Levite. These two ministers could not help the man: perhaps they believed him dead, or the robbers were still nearby, or he was faking in order that he might then rob them. These men do not see a person, they see someone who is weak and can be ignored and denied personhood: “He is half-dead anyway, what can I do?” And the Lord comes. He comes neither as a king, although he is, nor as a priest: he comes as one who is himself already marginalised, a Samaritan.

Christ identifies himself *with one who is weak*, although he is strong, *with one who is wicked*, although he is righteous, and *with one who is a heretic*, although he is truth. Can we do the same, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ? Can we identify with those with whom we disagree? Can we bear to listen to our neighbours not in order to tell them they are wrong but to experience our joint world through their eyes?

The Lord has compassion on him, meaning that he sees the suffering of another and enters himself into that suffering. This is our calling: we are not all called to suffer, though many of us do, yet we can all sit with those who do and reveal to them *their* personhood and *their* identity. Our society does not like suffering – we treat it as something which happens either in poor countries or else in houses and institutions out of sight away from civil society. We house elderly in care homes away from us, the poor in other neighbourhoods, the dying in hospices, the sick in hospitals, the criminals in prisons, the hungry sent to food banks: these are *not* necessarily bad places in themselves, it is good to be able to place people where they may receive the help they need, but they *are* bad if we use them to hide the marginalised away from our sanitised reality.

Christ, in the person of the Samaritan, pours oil and wine into the wounds – balm and anti-septic – and sets the man on his own beast, above himself, and provides for his recovery. And he provides for our recovery. He has brought us, by the grace of the Holy

Spirit, to this Church here today and offers to heal us, by revealing us as *true persons* in his image. Here today we are offered the healing for our falling among the robbers. *This* is the inn on the path as we ascend towards Jerusalem.

We receive, as the Apostle Paul said to the Church in Corinth, in Church the one “Who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” But “in the face of Christ” could also be translated “in the person of Christ.”⁹ It is in the person of Christ, by his being a *person* towards us and therefore our discovering our *true personhood* by him, that we become our *true selves*. And therefore, as Christ is our example, this is how we respond to others.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, be a person! Respond to the person in front of you, beside you, behind you as a person, as someone who has a unique gift to praise God and help nurture that gift. Each person you meet – but especially the marginalised, the poor, the sick, the elderly, the homeless, the immigrant, the weak, the oppressed – has the right to come to recognise Christ through our interaction with him. Listen to what is right in what he says and do not strive to correct all which may be wrong. Love your neighbour as being your very self in imitation of Christ.

That we too may glorify and honour the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in whose likeness we are created and to whom all praise and worship are due. Amen.