

World Humanitarian Day

The United Nations designates a number of days throughout the year with a specific annual focus. Last Friday was International Youth Day. Today is World Humanitarian Day. This is held each year to pay tribute to aid workers who risk their lives in humanitarian service and to mobilize people to advocate a more humane world. The 19th of August was chosen to coincide with the anniversary of the 2003 bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad in Iraq.

The theme this year is One Humanity. It is estimated that more than 130 million people around the world need humanitarian assistance to survive. The scale of the task is thus immense and can only realistically be achieved by nations coming together through the United Nations and other agencies. And yet much of the work is provided by volunteers and supported financially by ordinary individuals.

This is not a specifically religious agenda. Active concern for others is part of being human and many people with no faith at all regard this naturally as part of their duty towards their fellow men, women and children wherever they may be in the world. And we do not really need to be reminded of all the work being carried out in war zones and refugee camps, in areas hit by drought or natural disasters. Many dedicated men and women give selflessly of their time and talents to help others, by providing medical services, education, food or shelter.

Yes, this concern is incumbent on all human beings. Yet at the same time it is for Christians a specific duty, so well summed up the words of Jesus we heard just now (Matthew 25.31-40). To serve others is to serve Jesus, to serve God. And we serve God by serving and helping others. Our Lord's commission to his disciples, to us and to all who seek to follow him, is quite clear: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the poor, take care of the sick and prisoners. In other words, provide the basic necessities of life, and show genuine love and compassion to those in need. This may seem a formidable task. We can do this through prayer and by supporting aid agencies, but also in small ways in the situations we encounter in our daily lives.

Because it is a long passage we did not hear the second part of our Lord's words, which are even more challenging. Jesus tell us that if we fail to serve and care for others then we fail to serve God. We fail to be true disciples of Jesus.

For we are all one humanity. We are all children of the one God who seeks the well-being of all his children. Together we can help to break down the barriers that stand in the way of the common humanity that we share. Only then can true peace, justice and reconciliation be achieved.

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