

August 3 – 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Prepared by Sr. Janet S. Hockman, MM, Kathmandu, Nepal

Isaiah 55:1-3	All you who are thirsty, come to the water!
Psalms 145:8-9, 15-16, 17-18	God satisfies the desire of every living thing.
Romans 8:35, 37-39	“...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God ...”
Matthew 14:13-21	Jesus asks the disciples to feed a crowd that has gathered to hear him. Five loaves and two fishes are used to feed the crowds and leftovers are gathered.

“Come” says Isaiah in the first reading to those who were weary in exile, to those whose hopes were not fulfilled. And, without invitation, a large crowd gathered in the gospel account. Gatherings ...

Gatherings! Where don't I see or know of them daily in life in Nepal? There are twice daily lines of people with assorted water containers at roadside water taps. People gather in teashops, around carom boards and card games, on the sunny side of roads in chilly times and shady places in the heat. They gather for rice planting and wheat harvesting, over land disputes and water rights in villages. Visiting gurus attract crowds in open fields; ancient religious feasts and celebrations call throngs to pools and temples and stupas. Posters and banners and bullhorns and door-to-door canvassing invite “brothers and sisters” to gather for events. People huddle for street dramas and masses protest disappeared journalists, rising fuel prices, and to free Tibet.

“Come to the water.” That is exactly what thousands of people have done in Kathmandu. But the water to which they have come is the drastically receding and badly polluted Bagmati River. Two years ago I daily walked over one of the main bridges, noticing and marveled at the seasonal changes and the powerful water flow after winter and in the monsoon season. These days, in or out of vehicles, people hold their noses and cover their mouths with the stench and hope to pass quickly over that bridge. Sometimes the water does not even cover the river rocks. Yet along the banks of the Bagmati is a growing population in houses constructed of discarded materials. Nothing as sophisticated as a tent-city exists here. For miles and miles, where water used to flow, is a meshed population of migrant workers seeking fortune in the city, of internally displaced persons who still hope to someday return to villages, of people who may have another small dwelling but without funds to pay even basic expenses, of others who have menial jobs but without another place to live. People of all castes live side-by-side, an array of poverty calling them all together. Men and women and children, a crowd, like in the gospel, too large to count ... mostly agrarian folk now gathered on stone.

They have come, in varying degrees, without money but not without price. There are no provisions for potable water or sanitation. The exposed stone bank is the toilet; the river itself is used for bathing, the same river along which most cremations in Kathmandu are done. The waters are a source of income, not of nourishing fish but for un-burned pieces of wood that can be resold, for discarded clothing, or bobbing plastic containers. Whatever diseases float in the Bagmati River and thrive among the river-side dwellers are yet to be determined. Education is not in schools for these children but in survival techniques with keen sight to retrieve things for living. Imagine the answer to the common question “where is your house?” being “along the Bagmati.” For some the cost must be of personal pride and terrible sadness in not being able to provide for their families.

The braid of problems is complex – global warming, touching even the great Himalayans; ecological issues of polluted waters; cycles of poverty; issues of land-rights; and certainly the effects on the human spirit.

Recently Nepal held its first democratic election. The two and a half century old Hindu kingdom is now part of history. Preceding the elections, there was a feeling of constantly turning one's head to hear from every side. Internally, pressure was building from indigenous groups demanding recognition and rights, as well as established political parties and the Maoists. Externally, Nepal was under a microscope into which the eyes of international superpowers peered and uttered directive suggestions. All may care about what happens in Nepal but for very, very different interests. Control is attained with the carrots of finances and aid packages. Which of them support self-reliance and human development and not dependence? Which bind the world with common concern to conserve the universe and teach to act locally in reducing pollution of water, air and land? Which address the progress toward peace after this tiny nation's intense 10-year conflict?

Crowds went to the place where Jesus sought quiet time. Certainly many of them were curious about Jesus, or were simply urged along by companions, or had nothing better to do. They arrived as they were; Jesus encountered them as they were. They met the healing One, the seeing One, the challenging One, the compassionate One. They stayed on in a cycle of hunger, without having planned ahead. Send them away? Dismiss them? Why? They, too, were hungry... like us. Hungry to know how to recognize truth; hungry to discern what does not satisfy and does not last; hungry to share place and space of peace. Hungry to be treated as equals - that all may be fed.

We don't know the end of the story... What happened to the fed and dissipated crowd who witnessed blessing and received the broken? I pray the nourishment lives on among us all and is far reaching, wherever any of us who have been fed are, even along the banks of the Bagmati. "You feed them."

For more information

Read more in Maryknoll's "Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world," a resource developed by Maryknoll missionaries who witness the global impact of U.S. political and economic decisions. Through this resource, Maryknoll missionaries encourage voters in the 2008 elections to scrutinize candidates' policy proposals through the lens of those who, both in the U.S. and overseas, lack basic necessities, endure the scourge of racism, live with gender-based discrimination or feel the immediate impact of climate change.

Email for a copy, or find the election guide here:
www.maryknollogc.org/2008elections/index.htm

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