

To Easter, traveling with the least of them all

By JAMES K. HEALY

Funny. They weren't even sincere; just trying to trick him when they asked "What is the greatest law?" Yet Jesus, who could have overwhelmed them with chapter and verse, gave them the perfect truth: "Love God with all you've got, and love your neighbor as yourself. That's the Law and the Prophets!"

There he goes again. That persistent inclusion of "neighbor." Then and now, to the frustration of many and the fury of some, he forever refuses to point a pathway to God that does not pass through the busy, blustering neighborhood of human relationships.

When they change the focus and want to know the "bottom line," the final outcome, Jesus says, again, so simply, "All will share the same fate. The King will gather all together, and say: 'You're in

Others will be deeply troubled to learn that intimacy with God depends upon involvement with neighbors — and the "least" of them at that!

or you're out depending on this: How did you treat the person who needed you?"

So sad for the selfish. Desperate for a clear distinction between love of God and love of neighbor, they would try to save their souls with an accent or emphasis:

"Jesus, I never saw you naked or hungry or desperate or alone. I lived in the 20th century, I never met you." And Jesus will say, "Cut it. It will not wash. Each time a person in need was before

Holy Ghost Fr. James Healy is pastor of Queen of Peace Church, Arlington, Va.



you, that — oh, poor fool to learn so late — that was your encounter with God. When someone needed you and you turned away, you turned from me, Jesus, your brother."

So glad for the just. How wise of them to understand that to love your neighbor is to love the Lord. But, wait; what's this? Jesus says the just will be surprised and will raise the same question as the sinners. They will exclaim with wonder: "What? I'm getting into heaven because I fed or clothed or visited you? How can this be? When did that ever happen?"

And Jesus will answer, "Don't you fret. Whenever you responded to one who needed you, you were dealing with me!"

What a shocking idea. Preachers say the secret to salvation is to name Jesus as your savior, to be baptized a Christian, to follow all the rules and regulations, stay in line, be a loyal Methodist or Baptist or Catholic, whatever, but, first and last, you *must* name Jesus as your savior.

Yet, here is Jesus savior saying, "You're surprised to know it was I? You who showed kindness and compassion for the person in need? You're only discovering now that those responses to needy, unnoticed people were Christ encounters? Well, surprise! Come on into the kingdom!"

Could Jesus possibly mean to suggest that, when the kingdom at last comes in its fullness, distinguished religious leaders might be standing outside

watching? That people of strange, unknown religions or no faith at all, will march into the kingdom, blest of God, just because they cared and comforted their neighbors in need? Would he have us believe that divorced and remarried people are justified simply because they were kind and caring? Would he imply that those baptized who never went to church may gain heaven just because they were compassionate and generous?

Some will rejoice that the way can be so simply said and so easily understood. Others will be deeply troubled to learn that intimacy with God depends upon involvement with neighbors — and the "least" of them at that!

Our Lenten journey may expose our hearts as less than open to this Jesus truth. Perhaps the best we've managed til now is "Jesus, yes, always. But those 'least' of his friends?" Perhaps we have even been participants in building structures and supporting arrangements that help to obstruct the law of love that Jesus proclaims.

With or without our blessing, Jesus stands firm. He warns and promises: The ultimate measure of our success as human beings, as children of God, is our success as servants, lovers, friends, companions to one another and always, especially to the one most in need.

We make our way through Lent to Easter. We dearly hope to touch and be touched anew by the risen Christ. We could make it happen. We already know where to find him. ■

National Catholic Reporter

NCR

MARCH 18, 1994 VOL. 30, NO. 20