

13th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME Year A

Opera is for the elite. Or at least that's a fairly common perception. The rather esoteric culture surrounding the world's major opera houses, the high prices of tickets and the strong perception that there is little in opera to appeal to the masses, all pose a problem to the management of opera companies. How can they ask for huge public subsidies for an art form that will benefit only the very few ?

Two hundred and seventy years ago, an opera with a different thrust hit the English stage. Composed by John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera* deliberately challenged every perceived notion of what opera was and who it was for. Gay set the opera in London – not the London of high society, but back-street, low-life London. The beggars, criminals and prostitutes, excluded from regular opera, were the stars. And Gay's message was clear. The upper-class elite who would see his opera would be faced with the uncomfortable truth that their wealthy lifestyle was at least in part responsible for the squalor and deprivation of so many.

The religion of the scribes and Pharisees was for the elite. The ritual requirements of the Law were almost impossible to observe in full, and religious leaders exploited this fact to wield an authority way above what they deserved. The religion lived and taught by Jesus was the equivalent of the Beggar's Opera to their stultified Fidelio. Jesus was reclaiming religion for all, especially for the most excluded. Often it was the elite who were directly faced with his message, and challenged to respond.

Jesus taught that discipleship was not a hobby for religious people. It was meant to be something wholehearted, and accessible to all. Discipleship is a priority, *the* priority, to the extent that Jesus can say that only those who lose their lives for his sake will find life.

The rich woman in today's first reading extended hospitality to a traveler, the prophet Elisha, and received the unlooked-for reward of a son. The second reading, from the letter to the Romans, prepares us to see how this story is relevant today. It shows the close identification of the believer with Christ. As in baptism we share his death, so also we share his resurrection. What happens to him, happens to those who follow him. So Jesus is able to say that if anyone performs even the lowliest service for a disciple of his, they will most emphatically not lose their reward. Their attention to a disciple is hospitality to the master, Jesus himself.

Jesus radically undermines the religion of the scribes and Pharisees and hands God back to the masses, who have been so long deprived of him. It is no wonder Jesus had such a following amongst the underclass, and that he was resented by the powers that be. No longer do the pious need to give all their attention to the ritual of the Temple in Jerusalem; no longer do they seek to please God by paranoid adherence to the details of the Law. God is much closer than that. God, in Jesus, is as close as his nearest disciple. And to serve the disciple is to serve him.

As the wealthy woman offered hospitality to Elisha, so are we to do the same to those we meet who are engaged in the Lord's service. Our hospitality may not be in the form of a meal or a bed for the night. It could be a simple greeting, an offer of help, a supportive word. We offer this service because it is good in itself, but also because we know that in serving them we serve Christ who sent them.

For Jesus, service of God is inextricably bound up with service of people. We cannot have a religion that is exclusively focused on rules and ritual. They have their place, but it is not at the heart of faith. We must not become like the Scribes and Pharisees. Rather we focus on Christ, serving him and honouring him wherever we meet him.

And then there is the call to commitment. Jesus is quite clear that our religion isn't a hobby or a minor interest. It is central to our identity as individuals and as a community and holds before us our final end: eternal life with God. We do not live our faith by being religious in what we wear or say. Rather, we live our faith in simple service of the Christ who, though Lord and Master, came to serve us.