

"HELLO, HUMAN BEING!"

INTRODUCTION

An obituary appeared in a newspaper some time ago which read in part like this:

"Morris Donotowsky, known for more than three decades to the residents of Times Square as 'the walking department store', died Friday in his one room apartment at 357 West 29th Street. His age was 65. To the police and the store owners he was Morris, the peddler, a man who brought with him an assortment of toothpaste, razor blades, candy, socks, and other small items that he sold in luncheonettes or other shops - his only offices. All year he wore the dark cap and vest that came to be identified with him. As he moved about, he passed out royal titles to those he met. There were King Jack, Queen Sadie, Count Mike. And if there was no title, his greeting to those he met was a simple, 'Hello, human being!'" Prince George
Lady Eliz.

DEVELOPMENT

"Hello, human being!" When you stop to think about it, so much of the gospel is found hidden in those few words. When a Christian says them, he means, "Hello, my brother. Hello, child of God! God loves you. He cares for you. I care for you. You are worthy of being loved. Hello, human being!" A few blocks to the north of us, in the East Harlem Protestant Parish they used to talk about "gossiping the gospel" - meaning that in everyday encounters and conversations we are to spread the good news of God, in our words and gestures of greeting. Whenever we see and greet a stranger or a friend, and can say and mean "Hello, human being...." - we're "gossiping the gospel".

JESUS AND ZACCHEUS

Morris, the peddler, in a way reminds one of Jesus, the prophet. He, too, walked the city streets giving out royal titles to the most ordinary and common folk he met along the way, making lepers and beggars and traitors, thieves, prostitutes, yes, and even the rich and the powerful feel like kings and queens.

I couldn't help but think of Zaccheus in this respect. He was a rich man. He'd gotten rich by exploiting the poor of his own country. He defrauded them in the service of the Roman government that had occupied his land, extracting taxes from his own people. He wasn't very popular with his own people. As a matter of fact, he was ostracized and hated by them. To such a man, with all the choice of the city of Jericho, with all the fine and good people - to such a man Jesus said, "I want to stay in your house today!" Zaccheus was amazed and the crowd that heard it was angry....angry that Jesus should deliberately choose to go and befriend an obviously unworthy man? But Jesus said to them, "He, too, is a son of Abraham". "He, too, is a human being".

How hard it is, at times, for us, as it must have been for that crowd of people, to see and acknowledge the human being in other people. So quickly, so easily, and so conclusively, we size up the other person, mark him down, label him, and dismiss him with a word. "He's a grouch; he's a reactionary; she's uptight; he's a radical". With one little word we snuff out the humanity of the other person, make him a thing and turn off our own humanity toward that same person.

Very often today young people are so labeled and dehumanized by their elders, and something, for instance, something as innocent as long hair is enough to trigger this dehumanizing kind of reaction. When some people see long hair it seems that involuntarily they get accompanying images: dirty, rebellious, drugs,

promiscuous, psychedelic, un-American. This can be embarrassing to one who has long hair, or whose hair is getting longer than it has been, or to one who is growing a beard or a handsome pair of sideburns. Some, involuntarily and almost against their wills will find a negative reaction setting in as they view the long hair, and you can almost see the wheels turning, "Be careful, you can't trust him..." "What's he trying to prove with all that long hair..." So I have a certain sympathy for ~~that teen-age boy who came to our Fellowship Supper a couple of weeks ago when Dr. Hull spoke on drugs who wore the button with the words, "Jesus wore long hair...."~~ *Joe Namath who answered the critics of his beard reminded them that Jesus had one, too.*

Now this is just a tiny example of what we do to each other every day. Usually without being aware of it, we react to something external, some little gesture, the way somebody walks, the way he smiles, some little thing that for some reason irritates us and it triggers a whole negative reaction so we can't even see him as a human being for a little while. So we say to people, "Hello, beard; hello, boss; hello, subordinate; hello, black man; hello, whitey; hello reactionary; hello, grouch; hello, uptight". But seldom, "Hello, human being."

The point is, our prejudices of all kinds prevent us from saying, "Hello human being" to many people - both young and old. And let's face it, the old get labelled and dismissed and categorized today just as easily as the young and white hair can be as much a liability, or more, than long hair. Sometimes I get the impression that youth-oriented culture wants to get the old folks into the nursing home as fast as possible. Advertisers, politicians, sometimes preachers, cater to the young because that's where the action is, and the affirmation, and the vote. ^How at home, ~~or~~ in the office, or on the street and in the nation, can we say and mean to our aging people, "Hello, human being?" To people who feel and oftentimes with good reason - rejected, tossed aside, and the juggernaut of youth roaring by and rolling right over them, how can we say and mean it, "Hello, human being".

The sad thing is that we sometimes dehumanize most of all those who are closest to us. You've had this experience - it's easier to be gracious, or just courteous, to a total stranger than it is to your own wife, husband, colleague,

"We flatter those we scarcely know, we please the fleeting guest.

And deal full many a thoughtless blow, to those we love the best."

With a husband, or a wife, or a parent or a child or someone you work with, you know how it is, you get into a pattern of action and reaction that builds up over weeks, months and years, so that one little glance, or word, or silence, or gesture can trigger hostility or a bitterness that's building up all the time. And the capacity to see and greet one another as human is just destroyed. Sometimes we can't even muster a "hello" to each other.

Remember how Shylock put it in the Merchant of Venice? "Hath not a Jew eyes, feelings, affections, hands, organs, senses, passions?" Hath not a husband, wife, child, colleague, mother-in-law, feelings, affections? Hath not a friend turned hostile? Hath not a colleague, dean or president, or a member of the SDS, a parent, a policeman, a Negro, a Puerto Rican, senses, feelings? Who bugs you? Who is it very hard for you to go up to and look at and smile at and say and mean it, "Hello, human being". And yet - when somebody's got courage and the imagination and the humor to do just that little thing, all heaven breaks loose!

BACK TO ZACCHEUS

Let's go back to Zaccheus for a moment. Look what happened to Zaccheus when Jesus greeted him. He lost his cool and probably some of his cash. Love penetrates armor that can resist hate all day long, Zaccheus knew how to deal with contempt, but not with compassion. Jesus didn't say to him, "Look, you lousy thief, you traitor, you tight-wad, pay back everybody what you owe them, shave off that beard, start going to the synagogue, and then maybe I'll have a cup of coffee with you". And Zaccheus flipped, and all kinds of new possibilities and potentialities poured out of him because Jesus affirmed his humanity, his selfhood, his sense of dignity. He brought out the best that was in him.

All of us live constantly on the border of humanity or inhumanity, and so often the smallest thing can tip the scales either way. We can trigger new life in other people every day if we want to take the time to do it. There are so many ways we can say "hello" to another: a glance, a wave, a handshake, a nod, a note, a telephone call, an invitation, a smile, a request. We who carry the name of Christian are called to do this; this is our vocation - to be "hello" people, to avoid getting locked into negative responses to people, to be open to others, to break free from those reaction patterns that so often block us from being brothers to others.

Some of you may recall that Herb Gardner wrote a play a year or two ago called, "The Goodbye People". There's a marvelous scene in the play where the lead character, who had been trying to get support for his failing business from relatives and friends, finally fails. He says to one of them over the phone, "You're so much better at saying Goodbye than Hello. With Hello, you're wary and cool. Always a soft and cautious "hello". You don't want to get involved, you just open the door a chink. But you're really great at goodbye. You just warm up something wonderful. 'Goodbye, so long! See you, buddy! Keep the faith!" We're a lot better aren't we, at saying Goodbye than Hello. We've learned how to fence off intruders into our privacy or our pocketbooks. We have learned so well how to look at people and not see them, to listen to people, but not hear them. And we're not even aware of it most of the time until someone or something wakes us up.

The other evening, my not-quite-two-year-old daughter woke me up. It was one of those times after dinner when I was holding her in my lap, but not giving her all of my attention. Apparently she wanted me to look at something she had in her little hand. I was trying to listen to one of the other children tell me something about what had happened at school that day. My wife meanwhile was trying to tell me something about her day, and just about then the telephone started to ring. All of a sudden I felt two tiny palms on my cheeks, pulling my face, and an insistent little voice saying, "Dad-dy, Dad-dy". So I looked down and I saw a marvelous little girl's shining face and it was like Easter! And I realized in a flash how many, many Easters I miss because so much of the time I am blind, deaf, and always saying Goodbye....looking and not seeing them, listening and not hearing them.

Somehow, every Sunday when we're here together in worship and fellowship, what we do is to turn to each other so that we can see each other - face to face - and say to one another: "Look at me - listen to me - say 'hello' to me - don't ignore me..." I think it would be like Easter all over again - every week, if we did this. Sister Corita once said:

"To believe in God is to have someone who knows you through and through and likes you, still and all."

It's so hard to believe, isn't it, that someone can know us through and through and

still like us, even love us. But when we encounter someone like that, as when Zaccheus met Jesus, then Easter happens, all heaven breaks loose and love is come again!

CLOSING In "The Man of LaMancha", Don Quixote, the peddler, the prophet of Spain, greets the kitchen slut, Aldonza, as though she were a queen and gives her a new and lovely name, Dulcinea. At first Aldonza responds to Don Quixote with crude cynicism and says he's after what all men are after, but through her crudity and cynicism, he keeps affirming her nobility of spirit, her virtue, her beauty until she is shaken and angrily asks: "Why do you say these things? Why do you do these things?" And he says, "What things, my lady?" "These ridiculous things you say!" "I hope to add some measure of grace to the world". "The world's a ung heap and we are maggots that crawl on it!" "MY lady knows better in her heart!" So slowly, through the play, Aldonza, - tough, crude, exploited, cynical Aldonza - begins to lose control....like Zaccheus and begins to believe that maybe Don Quixote knows her through and through and likes her still and all. Until she sings:

"Take the clouds from your eyes and see me as I really am.
Can't you see what your gentle insanities do to me - rob
me of anger and give me despair? Blows and abuse I can
take and give them back again. Tenderness I cannot bear".

Nor can you or I. For love penetrates armor that can resist hatred all day long!

So we understand why, at the end of the play, Don Quixote is dying and confused and doesn't remember who he is or who other people are, or why Aldonza pleads with him to remember her. And he says, "Is it so important?" And she through her tears says, "Everything - my whole life - you spoke to me and everything was different. You looked at me, and you called me by another name - Dulcinea. Once you found a girl and called her Dulcinea. When you spoke the name, an angel seemed to whisper, 'Dulcinea, Dulcinea'".

Prince George, Lady Elizabeth...

Zaccheus....King Jack, Queen Sadie, Count Mike....human beings, hello.

LET US PRAY O Christ, who came among us to care for all sorts and conditions of men, help us to control our dislike of other people, to be rid of the prejudices that preventing us from reaching out to others, and lead us further along the way of compassion. Take us in hand when we begin to grow callous, hard, indifferent and make us like thee, who didst reach out to all men with the love of God. Amen