59. Sometimes There Is No Answer

Last Sunday I travelled on the Rome Metro, the underground train service, to San Giovanni, the station next to the Pope’s Cathedral Church of St John Lateran which is the oldest of the four Patriarchal Basilicas in Rome. On my ride to San Giovanni, I observed a relatively young woman, no more than 22, I guess, and carrying a young child, moving through the train with a cup held out, begging for money. I gave her nothing.

Just as in Sudan, there are many people in Rome trying to eke out a living: people selling leathergoods or toys on street corners, some busking and others simply begging. By chance, an hour later, as I returned from San Giovanni the woman was again on the train, child still on her hip. There are many trains separated by only a few minutes. So it was indeed improbable that I would catch the train she was on. But there she was. This time I gave her two Euros. I watched others. A few gave; most didn’t.

There are worse ways for a young woman to make a living. At least I gave without expecting anything in return but I found myself thinking why did I eventually give to her but not to others who asked. I don’t really know, yet I felt compassion for this woman who seemingly had to use, some might say abuse, her mother-child relationship to stay alive. Another man on the train played a piano accordion and sent a boy, barely a teenager, with a much smaller accordion through the carriages to solicit money. Maybe busking is not begging, but in some ways it is. I did not give. My resources are limited.

In Sudan the average wage for an unskilled worker is about 250 Sudanese pounds per month. That equates to about $90 per month or an annual salary of $1,080. The local Church leaders instruct us to stay near to this level of remuneration. Yet I also know workers for some non-government organisations whose annual salary is 50 to 60 times that amount but significantly less than what many many could earn in their home countries. Some would call the low Sudanese wages grave injustice; but what should one do about it when one does not have the capacity to change conditions that are so widespread throughout the country.

A large number of priests have taken up well paid jobs with government ministries or non-government organisations. I find myself wondering how many of the teachers and nurses we are training will leave their key service delivery professions for more lucrative occupations. I suspect that it will be many years before salaries of teachers and nurses will be sufficient to make those professions more attractive in Southern Sudan.

I think, nonetheless, that it is imperative that we continue to strive to raise the standards of education and health care. I believe also in a just wage but it is difficult to define what that should be in such a place as Sudan. When faced with many needs and conflicting priorities there is often no immediate answer on how to act justly but sensibly.

There is one thing, however, that is very clear. ‘Judge not and you shall not be judged’. Some might condemn the woman with the baby on the train as abusing her child, that she is using her child as an effective way to make money. Others might see it is the act of a loving mother swallowing her womanly pride to look after her child. We simply cannot judge the motives of this woman or other people in needy situations.

Are we more likely to give to dishevelled and dirty beggars or to clean and well dressed ones? Are they in genuine need or are they ‘con artists’? Some solve this dilemma, as I must admit I often do, by simply ignoring the person. That is made easier by the fact that I usually don’t know what they are saying! But Christmas is coming, the celebration of Jesus born in a stable. The significance of that humble birth cannot be ignored.

- Br Bill