

## Thirty First Sunday of Ordinary Time

The man in today's gospel is asking Jesus: 'What is the most important thing for me to do with my life? What really matters? What's it all about?' We should treasure Jesus' reply and take it to heart for the man's question is one that we all ask at one time or another. Jesus quotes a text from the Book of Deuteronomy, a text that was well known to those asking the question: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength'.

To reflect on this with you I sought the help of the great saint of love, Saint John of the Cross. In his prose commentary on his poem 'The Spiritual Canticle', he writes: 'All that we do and all our trials, even though they are the greatest possible, are nothing in the sight of God. For through them we cannot give God anything or fulfil his only desire which is to lift up our soul to himself ... God is pleased only with our love, for it is love alone that unites the lover to the one loved'(Spiritual Canticle 28,1).

Since we do not want to waste our life, let us look more closely at what it might mean to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength. The word 'all' is central. Life is a journey and what matters is that we grow in our capacity to love in this way, and when we recognise certain thoughts or patterns of behaviour as getting in the way of love we are to be willing to persevere in doing something about it. That way lies the road to holiness. In biblical usage the word 'heart' has a more focused meaning than in English. It refers to the centre of our being whence arise our thoughts and memories and decisions, as well as the associated feelings. Feelings that are associated more directly with our physical, bodily urges and needs (what we sometimes describe rather crudely as 'gut reactions') are associated with other internal organs, not the heart.

When Jesus says to love God with all our *heart*, he means us to give priority to God in all our thoughts, words and decisions. He wants our heart to be pure, that is to say, to be so clear that the face of God is always, as it were, reflected in it. If our heart is pure, then our thoughts and decisions and feelings will be good. If our heart is rotten, what comes from our heart will have the stench of sin about it. You remember Jesus' promise: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'(Matthew 5:8). Notice that Jesus places stress on loving God with *all* our heart - not half our heart, or bits and pieces of our heart, but all our heart. It is important to stress again that this is not primarily a matter of feelings, but of a heart that is fixed like a compass on God, and that longs always to listen to God and to do God's will. As John of the Cross says: 'The union of love of God is a habitual and loving attentiveness of the will to God'(Spiritual Canticle 28,10).

We may indeed experience feelings of love for God. In fact the opening words of today's responsorial psalm are 'I love you, Lord, my strength', perhaps better translated 'I am moved with tender feelings of love for you, Lord, my strength'(Psalm 18:1). This tender word is found 14 times in the psalms, though it is important to note that on every other occasion it refers to the tenderness of God's love for us (Psalm 25:6; 40:11; 51:1; 69:16; 77:9; 79:8; 103:4,13; 112:14; 116:5; 119:77,156; 145:9). Today's psalm is the only time in the Hebrew Bible that we find it used of our love for God.

We may have tender feelings of love towards God, and if we do then we should thank God for them. But the love of which Jesus is speaking is something which we are to have, whatever our feelings or lack of them. John of the Cross writes: 'Since the soul cannot in this life enjoy God essentially, all the sweetness and delight it tastes, however sublime, cannot be God ... If, in any way, the will can comprehend God and be united to Him, it is through love, and not through any gratification of our desires. And since the delight, sweetness, and satisfaction that can come to the will is not love, no delightful feeling can be an adequate means for the union of the will with God. It is the operation of the will which is the proportionate means for this union. The will's operation is quite distinct from the will's feeling. By its operation, which is love, the will is united with God and terminates in Him, and not by the feeling and gratification of its desire, which remains in the soul and goes no further. The feelings serve only as stimulants to love'(Letter of 14th April 1589).

To love God with all our heart is to keep the centre of our being fixed on God, so that Jesus' way of thinking becomes ours, and to do always God's will no matter how we feel. In this lies the key to sanctity.

We are to love God, too, with all our *soul*. Here the focus is on our longing. This soul-love finds expression beautifully in another psalm: 'Whom have I in heaven but you? Earth has nothing I desire besides you ... My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever ... As for me, it is good to be near God'(Psalm 73:25-28). We all experience this longing, for we are made to love God. Sadly, we often do not recognise that it is God whom we are seeking, and we seek satisfaction in distraction and sin. As Isaiah says: 'All you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come and eat! ... Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant'(Isaiah 55:1-3). And Jesus echoes this call when he says: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest'(Matthew 11:28).

The expression 'to love God with all your *mind*' is not found in the Book of Deuteronomy which Jesus is quoting. As we have seen it is already implied in the expression 'with all your heart'. However Mark adds it here, and it does highlight the importance of the way we think. Our minds can become so pre-occupied with ourselves and with the worries and cares of life that, like the sprouts of wheat strangled by the weeds in Jesus' parable, we can lose sight of God, we can forget to entrust ourselves to his love, and we can drift, waste our life and never know the joy of living to the full. Important as the mind is, John of the Cross reminds us: 'God does not communicate Himself to our soul through the knowledge which we have of Him, but through the love which comes from this knowledge. For just as love is the union of the Father and the Son, so is it the union of the soul with God'(Spiritual Canticle 13.11).

Finally, Jesus tells us to love God with all our *strength*. In the Spiritual Canticle John of the Cross writes: 'Now I occupy my soul and all my energy in His service; I no longer tend the herd, nor have I any other work now that my every act is love.' We are all gifted with enormous energy of soul, energy that can be wasted on trivia if we are not careful. Jesus is telling us to direct it all to love of God. As he says elsewhere: 'Seek God first, and everything else will be yours'. We might wonder how we can do this. John of the Cross has the answer. We share in the life of God, and it

is God's own energy that is poured into our souls. We are asked only to let it well up within us and flow back to its source: 'God will show us how to love Him as perfectly as we desire ... Transforming our soul into his love, God gives us his own strength by which we can love Him. As if he were to put an instrument in our hands and show us how it works by operating it jointly with us, he teaches us how to love and gives us the ability to do so'(Spiritual Canticle 38,4).

By way of conclusion, let us listen to this saint as he pleads with us: 'O souls, created for these grandeurs and called to them! What are you doing? How are you spending your time?'(Spiritual Canticle 39,7). Like many of the saints, he loves to quote from the Song of Songs: 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely'(Song of Songs 2:10-14).

God loves each of us now, as we are. Truly, there are many things perhaps that need to change, but God knows that only his love can bring about this change. Let us come to him, come as we are, seeking his love and asking that his Spirit will continue to give us the courage and the determination to respond to the grace which he is certainly offering us - the grace of holiness, the grace to love him not half-heartedly, but with all our heart; not in superficial ways, but with all the longing of our soul; not in rare moments but with all the honesty of our inquiring minds; and not in the backwaters of our lives, but with all the energy for life that wells up within us.

Sometimes, the circumstances of our lives discourage us from believing that this is possible, especially our own sins and the unjust ways in which others treat us. If we sin let us cast ourselves on God's abundant mercy. If others are treating us badly, let us heed the advice of John of the Cross: 'God knows what is suitable for us and arranges things for our good. Think nothing else but that God ordains all, and where there is no love put love, and you will draw out love'(Letter of 6th July 1591).

Finally, two short sayings from the saint: 'Why do you delay? From this very moment you can love God in your heart'(from the Prayer of a soul taken with love in Sayings of light and love). 'At the evening of life, you will be examined in love. Learn to love as God desires to be loved'(Sayings of light and love n.57).