

Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Today's First Reading is one of the most beautiful passages of the Hebrew Bible. The prophet Hosea pictures God as a Bridegroom, luring us away from our accustomed haunts into the empty spaces of our hearts where God wants to speak to us of love. We have done or not done what others have told us to do. We have fitted in or not fitted in with the expectations of our peers. We have accepted or not accepted the ideals, dreams, and visions of our parents, teachers and friends, but as yet we have not discovered our own. We have not as yet found the secrets of our own heart where God's Spirit is calling us into communion.

Not that we are meant to be alone. We are not meant to be separated individuals. We are persons called to be in relationship, in communion – a communion of love in which we discover our unique selves. Those who truly love us want nothing less and it is their love that makes the discovery possible. It is in love relationships that we learn that it is in the gift to others of our unique selves that we find true fulfilment; not, as some would claim, in centring everything on ourselves, using everything, including people, as commodities for the gratification of our own presenting needs.

Please God, many people will offer us true love in many different ways. However, in the final analysis, the ultimate Lover can only be God. In words seemingly borrowed from an ancient marriage rite, God promises Israel a love that has five qualities.

Firstly God's love is just: that is to say, God will always act according to who God is. Thanks to Jesus we know that God is love, so God is promising that whatever might happen to us and whatever we might do, God will never do anything but love us. We might prove untrue, but God will always be true, for, as Saint Paul assures us, God 'cannot deny himself' (2Timothy 2:13).

Secondly, in loving us God always judges rightly: that is to say, God sees us as we really are and judges us accordingly. We cannot deceive God, nor can God pretend that things are other than they really are. At the same time, unlike the judgments we receive from others, God never distorts things, and God understands our weakness. God sees the heart. If we open our heart to God's love and if we truly want to respond in love, we have nothing to fear.

Thirdly, God makes a love commitment to us that God will never break. It is a covenant that God will never betray or take back. We can be unfaithful, and we can reject the love that God is offering, but God will never withdraw the offer. It is always there if we decide to turn back.

Fourthly, the love that God offers is a passionate one, full of feeling and affection: the kind of love which a mother has for the child in her womb. Hosea speaks of God's passionate love in the following words: 'It was I who taught you to walk, I took you up in my arms; but you did not know that it was I who healed you. I led you with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to you like one who lifts an infant to the cheek. I bent down to you and fed you ... How can I give you up? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender (Hosea 11:3-4, 8).

Fifthly, the love of God is real: it touches our lives in real ways as God continues to draw us into deeper and deeper communion. Because of this love we are told that we will know God with

that intimate knowledge that comes only in love.

The Responsorial Psalm also speaks of God's covenant love and affection, and adds the fact that God is fully aware of our sinfulness. God does not love us because we are innocent. God knows that love includes forgiveness.

And so we come to the Gospel. It is a day of fasting. People seem to find it easier to follow the requirements of religious devotion and ritual rather than face up to the radical demands of a truly religious life. Jesus knows that what we need most is not to be reminded of the Law but to experience God's love. He was intent on communicating to his contemporaries the essence of the good news, even if the pious were scandalised by his ignoring of practices customarily expected of the observant.

Jesus draws on the theme we have seen in Hosea. He is wanting us to celebrate the wonder of the intimate communion into which God is calling us. He knows that acknowledging and accepting the reality of God's love is essential to the repentance required of us if we are to experience the reign of God in our lives. Without this, we would remain locked in our sin. Jesus makes the point that the good news cannot be patched onto the old cloak of the Law, nor poured into its ancient skins. The new creation, which he is initiating, needs to be expressed in new ways.

However well-founded and inspiring the religious customs handed on to us may be, they cannot substitute for our openness to the surprise of God's self-revelation in the present moment. Every time a child is born into our world, a new cloth is created and we are gifted with new wine. Every generation brings with it a new energy and a new revelation — not contradicting the old, but certainly not able to be contained within it.

The call of Jesus is for us to be faithful to what has gone before by being as open to the surprise of God's action in our lives as were our ancestors in faith. We are being called ever forward into a future full of hope. Our Christian faith is faith in that promised future, which God will create through us if we listen now to 'every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:3 — see Matthew 4:4). In our willingness to do God's will, we must be ready to be detached from everything, however sacred it might appear. We must be ready, like Jesus, to 'seek first the kingdom of God' (Matthew 6:33).

The metaphor of the new wine requiring new skins is important in the realm of theology and catechesis. There are some who think that truth can be mastered permanently, and preserved in the skins of defined dogma. We do not seem to realise that truth is found in human judgment, and that, if we are to make right judgments, we must be continually open to new insight and be able to express these insights in words that relate to real questions. No one period of history, no one philosophy, no single point of view can contain the fullness of truth. Learning from the past and faithful to the insights of those who have gone before us, let us dare to face up to the new questions being asked today. Let us keep our eyes on Jesus and find the direction that will continue to lead us towards the truth, especially towards the revelation of the truth of God to be found in him.

We can experience darkness as we are drawn into God's love. We need to keep believing that it

is Love that is calling us. This is expressed beautifully in a poem by John of the Cross. The following translation is by Loreena McKennitt in her 'The Mask and the Mirror':

Upon a darkened night
The flame of love was burning in my breast
And by a lantern bright
I fled my house while all in quiet rest.

Shrouded by the night
And by the secret stair, I quickly fled
The veil concealed my eyes
While all within lay quiet as the dead.

Oh night thou was my guide
Oh night more loving than the rising sun
Oh night that joined the Lover to the beloved one
Transforming each of them into the other.

Upon that misty night
In secrecy, beyond such mortal sight
Without a guide or light
Than that which burned so deeply in my heart.

That fire 'twas led me on
And shone more bright than of the midday sun
To where he waited still
It was a place where no one else could come.

Within my pounding heart
Which kept itself entirely to him
He fell into his sleep
Beneath the cedars all my love I gave.

From o'er the fortress walls
The wind would brush his hair against his brow
And with its smoothest hand
Caressed my every sense it would allow.

I lost myself to him
And laid my face upon my lover's breast
And care and grief grew dim
As in the morning's mist became the light.

There they dimmed amongst the lilies fair
There they dimmed amongst the lilies fair
There they dimmed amongst the lilies fair