

Third Sunday of Lent

Today's Gospel ends on a very sobering note: 'Many believed in Jesus when they saw the signs which he gave, but he knew them all and did not trust himself to them'(John 2:25). I believe in Jesus. I find his life and especially the way he died, very attractive and convincing. I'm sure it is the same for you. So the Gospel poses for us the question: Can he trust himself to me?

He knows me through and through. So I ask myself: Can he entrust himself to me as his priest to preach his word and not just my own pet thoughts? Can he entrust himself to me, confident that when people come to me in trust I will listen to them, and share with them the teaching and wisdom of the Church and not just my own view of things? Can he trust me with his grace, that I will draw other people to him and not siphon off their affection for my own enjoyment, seeking their love and their praise for myself?

He comes to me in communion. Can he trust that I will be a sanctuary for him, a holy place where his word will be safe, where the Spirit of his love will be at home, where his Father will be loved? 'Many believed in him, but he knew them all and did not trust himself to them'. He wants to love me and to love through me. Do I force him to withhold his love and his trust because of the way I will abuse them? He seems to love a little bit through me. Maybe he would like to love a lot more, but I keep getting in the way. These are the kinds of questions which today's Gospel forces upon me. My response is to join the author of the today's Entrance Antiphon: 'My eyes are ever fixed on the Lord. Please look on me and be merciful.'

So what reflections might they encourage in you. You believe in him. Can he entrust himself to you? Whatever your walk of life, he asks you as one who wishes to live his life to 'love one another as I have loved you.' He asks you to do it as a teacher, as an aunt or uncle, as a neighbour, as a parent, as a husband or wife, as you with all your gifts and all your limitations. He asks you to love when things are hard as well as when everything's fine.

The key word there is 'love' a word about which, in spite of wonderful advances in psychology, our culture is in a state of almost complete confusion. In the Hebrew and Christian tradition, to love is to honour a commitment faithfully. Love is something you do. 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat'. 'This is my body which is given for you'. Of course feelings are involved. They are involved in everything. They are also important indicators to which we must listen, for they tell us a lot about ourselves. They are indicators of need and of attraction. But they are not always indicators of love.

We know some of Jesus' feelings as he hung on the cross. Besides the obvious feeling of pain, he felt abandoned by God, he felt thirsty. He must have felt terribly hurt by the crowd and by the absence of his special friends. He was probably so exhausted with pain that most feelings simply couldn't register. But he most certainly loved. He prayed that his enemies be forgiven. He sought to have his mother cared for and he gave her to the Beloved Disciple to sustain him in his grief. He continued to trust in God. He made of his dying a gift to us all for he wanted to convince us that God loves us – that is to say, that God will never withhold his love and his grace from us. In our insecurity we needed to be convinced of this, and Jesus wanted to hold nothing back. He gave his life for us. As John, the author of today's Gospel says in another place: 'Having loved those who were his own in the world, he loved them to the end'(John 13:1).

So, to return to our question. When Jesus comes to me and to you in communion at this Eucharist, can he trust himself to us that we will be instruments of his love to others, however we may or may not feel? Can he trust you to nurture the children, the teenagers and the adults that come into your life? We all have some wisdom to offer and sometimes we have a duty to correct others who are in our care, but can he trust you to respect the sacred space that each person's soul is and not intrude upon it?

It is these personal questions that are acted out on a large scale in today's very powerful Gospel. We are not used to seeing Jesus so angry. However the key point of John's dramatic scene is lost on us unless we read the scene just before it. Today's Gospel is chapter John 2:13-25. Do you know what happens in chapter 2:1-12? It is the marriage feast of Cana. These two scenes are meant to be read together. They offer us a choice and they are followed by chapter after chapter of conflict between Jesus the bridegroom and those who uphold the temple which we see being cleared by Jesus in the Gospel. The debate is over the nature of true religion.

The word religion comes from the Latin 'ligo' meaning to bind, and 're' meaning again. When things are falling apart, religion is that which binds everything back together again. Religion is meant to bring all our feelings, all our hopes, all our memories, all our longings, and bind them all together, making sense of them and directing them to the deepest purpose of our life. We are made to live in communion with God 'in whom we live and move and have our being'. We are made by love to experience love, to receive it and give it. We lose our bearings, we sin, we wander, and religion is there to get us back on track, back in touch with our hearts. True religion is not about conformity to some rigid set of rules imposed on us from the outside. No. True religion respects our unique mystery, while putting us in touch with reality at its most profound. It calls on our depths and binds them to the mysterious depths of God.

Religion, for Jesus, was not about the correct weights and measures, and tithes and sizes of goats and lambs and doves - the clutter of the temple. True religion is about love. More than that God wants to celebrate an unconditional and life-long commitment of love with us - the love of which marriage is a sacrament. Hence the marriage feast that is portrayed just before our Gospel scene.

True religion is about us filling our water jugs to the brim with all our thoughts and feelings and creative energy, all our love and all our laughter and tears - while recognising that we must await the word that transforms our water into the wine of God's Spirit - the Spirit of love. We can't do it, but God can. What we can do is told us by Mary in the words spoken to the bridegroom's attendants: 'Do whatever he tells you'. This includes the sensible injunctions of the Ten Commandments that we read this morning (which, incidentally are about what we do and don't do, not about how we might feel). They include our obedience to the simple but all-demanding command of Jesus: 'Love one another the way I love you'.

This is true religion. The institution is helpful only insofar as it encourages and enables love. God could not entrust himself to the temple religion. He did entrust himself to Jesus the bridegroom who loved us to the end. So our personal question must also be asked of our Church. Can God entrust himself to the Catholic Church? Obviously the answer must be nuanced. To the extent that the members of the Church love, the answer is yes - and who would be so blind as not to

see the immense love that can be found wherever one looks in the Church of which we have the privilege to be members. But to the extent that the members of the Church fail to love – the answer must be no. Today's Gospel stands as a constant call to the Church to repent – a very appropriate Gospel for Lent.

If we are going to ask this question, the best focus for us will be on our local parish. Does this parish provide an environment that encourages love. Does it do this only for some, while neglecting those most in need of it? Is this parish community open to the miracle of God's transforming grace, welcoming God's healing, God's forgiveness, God's presence in this temple. Does it provide a space for loving, for celebrating life, for welcoming people's gifts. Do you experience yourself being welcomed and encouraged to give yourself for others the way Jesus gave himself? For this is what love is!

Jesus wants to entrust himself to us. He risks it every time he places himself in our hands. Recognising how fickle we are as individuals, but also as a community, let us take to heart today's Entrance Antiphon, fix our eyes on Jesus, and confidently pray: 'Please look on me and be merciful.' He will.