

Fourth Sunday of Lent

The passage from Saint Paul selected as our Second Reading today ends with the words: 'We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it'(Ephesians 2:10).

You don't need me to tell you that the underlying problem with human existence as we experience it is sin. People behave badly and this spoils it for everyone. When you and I were born innocent into this world, it was already polluted by all the accumulated sins of humankind from the beginning right up to now. We know the importance of pure air, pure water and pure foods. If the human mind and heart were in a pure environment, if only truth were told and if we were treated only with love, what a wonderful start that would be for us all. But tragically life is not like that. The fact is that people do behave badly and by the time we are old enough to discern good from evil it is too late. We have been socialized into sinning. Even in a perfect environment, the kind of paradise described in the story of Adam and Eve, our human propensity to self-centredness is such that we would still be capable of doing what they did. The Genesis story is the Israelite version of an ancient myth that is about the human condition. It is about every man and every woman, created beautiful by God but seduced into sin by using our freedom, not for love, but for what we perceive as self-interest. We sin and our sins add to the environmental sludge of sin that keeps dragging our world down.

This is the moral of the First Reading. As a result of the obstinate pride, injustice and folly of the people, particularly but not only their leaders, the people of Judah found themselves exiled from their homeland. If we do evil things we cannot expect to avoid the evil effects that result. If we reject love our heart must suffer. If we close our eyes we can't see. If we break communion with God, the source of our life, we find ourselves wilting on the vine. The sap isn't getting through. We might gain the whole world, as Jesus said, but we will surely lose our soul. That much is obvious, but we need to be reminded of it so as to protect ourselves from the pollution in our environment and from our own slackness that makes us ready victims of its influence. Our hearts can grow inattentive. We are easily distracted.

The First Reading has another message. We may be unfaithful, but God is ever faithful. We may break our promises, but God will never break his. God is love and nothing we do will stop God pouring grace down upon us. God wants us to come home – to God and to ourselves. This constant invitation, to come as we are, to come home, to 'come to me all you who are weary and overburdened and I will give you rest'; this inviting of the Prodigal Son to a welcome home party; this largesse of God who keeps sending people out into the alleys and byways to invite us into the wedding feast of his Son – this finds an echo in our hearts. For we want to go home. We are made for God and our hearts are restless till they rest in God. This nostalgia for home is expressed poignantly in today's Responsorial Psalm – a song composed during the exile: 'By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept, remembering Zion'(Psalm 137:1).

Sin is essentially dysfunctional. It doesn't work. It doesn't satisfy our hearts and, if we dare to think about it, it makes no sense to our minds. We can only bear it by blocking off our mind and heart and stumbling around in the distracted surface of our lives. Sin can numb and then kill our soul. If we persevere in sin we become like a river that is dead. It keeps flowing, but nothing can live in it. The rain continues to fall, acid rain that destroys everything it touches. In our

impatience to get at the wine of love, we break the glass and the wine is lost. To sin is to lose reverence, to ignore the sacred, to try to live without the One who is the source of life. We simply cannot really live exiled from our own soul and from God who has made us for communion with him.

It is here that Jesus fulfills his irreplaceable role in our world. He is human like us. He was born into a polluted world, a violent world, a sick world. It sloshed all around him, sucking him finally into a whirlpool of suffering and death by crucifixion. It was, in many ways, an ugly world, and he was not spared its contagion. But he remained pure. He showed us that we are 'God's work of art'. He showed us what a good life looks like. We needed to see it. We needed to know that it is possible. And it is not just a matter of admiring Jesus from a distance while being unable to imitate him. As Paul says in today's Second Reading: 'God loved us with so much love that he was generous with his mercy: when we were dead through our sins, he brought us to life with Christ - it is through grace that you have been saved. God raised us up with him and brought us home with him' (Ephesians 2:4-5).

Home! He brought us home to our own hearts where God our Father dwells with his Son and the Spirit of love. We are indeed temples of God. We are 'works of art' – each one of us is a unique spark of the divine fire, a unique and very beautiful – yes, very beautiful, expression of God. Sure, we are rough diamonds, or, to change the metaphor, the oyster may well be far more prominent than the pearl hidden away in the shell. We need purifying. We need the expert touch of grace to cut the diamond so that it can refract the light. But there is no denying that we are God's work of art and he is calling us home to the heart, and Jesus is calling us to let the divine artist work on us so that we can 'live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it'.

Listen to Saint John of the Cross – he is speaking to each one of us, addressing our 'true self': 'O most beautiful of creatures, transcendent spirit, who long to know where your beloved is and where you may find him so as to be united with him. He dwells within you. You are yourself the tabernacle, his secret hiding place. Rejoice, exult, for all you could possibly desire, all your heart's longing is so close, so intimate as to be within you; you cannot *be* without him'(Spiritual Canticle 1,7).

As today's Prayer reminds us, we are called to a life of Faith, Hope and Love. We will never 'live the good life as God meant us to live it' unless we decide to believe what Jesus reveals to us about God and about ourselves. From this faith there will emerge a hope – a hope that things could be different; a hope that will encourage us to heed Jesus' words and to 'come out into the light'(John 3:21). The result will be that we will find ourselves living from the heart, living a life of love, living at home, in the presence of God – at home with ourselves and so able to give ourselves to others in love. It is love that is the radiance of the work of art which each of us is. If you are concerned for the environment, let God make a saint of you. One saint can make this world very beautiful. A community of saints could make of this earth a paradise.