

Second Sunday of Ordinary Time

The mood of today's readings is captured, as usual, by the Responsorial Psalm. The author is feeling alone, desolate, somewhat paralysed and desperate – the way we can sometimes feel. He wants God to speak to him, but there is only silence. If God is speaking, he certainly can't hear it. It is though his ear is blocked. Then one day God stoops down and carves a way through his blocked ear so that he can hear God speaking to him. At long last from his yearning soul comes the cry: 'Here I am. I delight in your word in the depths of my heart!' The Letter to the Hebrews uses these words to express the delight in the heart of Jesus at the Incarnation. At his baptism Jesus experienced God telling him: 'You are my Son. I love you; I delight in you.' In the agony and ecstasy of his life Jesus remembered these words and tells us often that his delight is in what God is saying to him and calling him to do. This same delight is echoed in today's First Reading where we read of the young Samuel who, when he realises that it is God who is speaking to him, cries: 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening'.

In today's Second Reading, Saint Paul speaks of God's will in regard to the way we give expression to our sexual energy. Let us see if we can experience a similar delight in listening to words inspired by God to enlighten us as to how we are to live loving sexual lives. Paul is warning against hurtful, dysfunctional, irresponsible, and therefore sinful, abuse of this God-given and powerful energy. What we say with our body should be in harmony with what we are saying with our heart and with our soul and spirit. Our sexual drive is not there so that we can experience some dead-end, narcissistic gratification. It is not there to give us power over others, either to seduce or to use them. It calls us out of ourselves to reach out to another to receive and to give love. Ultimately, of course, it is an expression of our longing for God. As Saint Augustine says: 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and we are restless till we rest in you'(Confessions 1.1).

Paul reminds us that our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. What an amazingly beautiful truth. God who is love dwells within us. Our sexual energy is an impulse to share this love with others and to receive, with wonder, their longing to share this God-given love with us.

We cannot separate our sexuality from our energy for love, which takes many forms according to the reality of our relationships – love of parent for child, of teacher for student, of friend for friend, of priest for the community. It is ultimately the one energy impelling us beyond the narrow confines of our own person to reach out and engage lovingly with the whole of creation to which we belong.

There is a lot that we still do not understand about homosexual relationships, though, thank God, we are becoming increasingly aware of its special graced reality. Here I will limit my comments to the acquired wisdom of the Christian community in regard to heterosexual love. There is, as we know, a special relationship of committed love that binds two people together as wife and husband, and, through the fruit of sexual love, as

parents of children. This is not an energy to be played with carelessly or indulged as though people were objects of experimentation. It is a vital energy that is directly concerned with love: human love in all its dimensions. In the Christian Church the holiness of this love is recognised as a sacrament; that is it is experienced as a vehicle of grace, ebbing and flowing between two people who in their weakness and their strength have chosen to commit themselves to each other in a bond of trust. Their genital sexual union, physical, emotional and spiritual, has its own special healing, its own special promise and its own special grace. It is a sacrament of God's love one to the other: a symbol of Jesus' love for the Church; a statement to the world of the faithful, forgiving and life-giving love of God for us.

The famous sculptor, Michelangelo, saw in a piece of marble a form which, by chipping away at the stone, he gently and delicately released as a Pietà or a David. All true love is like that. To divert our sexual energy into thoughtless and frustrating self-gratification runs the danger of breaking the glass to get at the wine. It indulges a need and a desire without satisfying either, and it does not bring peace. To say with the body what is not being said by the spirit is to lie, and *true* love is what we are all seeking. In today's reading, Paul encourages us to resist the many stupidities of our culture in this matter and to stay with our deepest truth. Sexual love is a contemplative reality.

This is well expressed in a poem by Thomas X. Corrigan (*Holy Ground*, Spectrum Publications, 1992). He entitles it 'Honouring the Other'.

Your body, like a burning bush to me,
I peer at you in curiosity,
gazing as I encounter your beauty.
Stimulated, my wanting inflames me,
my desiring wants to grasp you, use you,
my self-seeking sees only part, not all,
and I'm moved to possess you just for me,
feeling only my self-satisfaction,
seeing only what might gratify me.

As I move closer, my senses aroused,
yearning, I'm full of myself wanting you,
titillating my own longing feeling.
You vulnerable, I take advantage,
imposing my unpleasant heat on you.

Graced moment, an inner voice interrupts:
'Come no nearer and keep holy this ground.'
I pause at a respectable distance
as I honour you in your sacredness.
I cherish and behold your whole being,

wonder at your created dignity,
I hold you in awe, leave you free to be,
give you room to move and space for yourself,
waiting, respecting your needs beyond mine.

In this holy place there is give and take,
no exploitation of your sacredness,
no insensitiveness violating you,
no exploitation, defacing, or spoiling,
fracturing you into broken pieces,
manipulating without permission.

I honour the mystery that is you.
Unpossessed, intact, you are gift for me.
Untouched, your whole being is touchable.
In mutual awareness we are free,
feel safe, together, on this holy ground.

Finding our full sexual identity and living it in a creative, love-giving, life-giving and self-giving way is something that takes a lifetime to learn. We have to learn to love well and, so long as we are genuine in wanting to learn, we have to find it in our hearts to forgive others who have hurt us and to seek forgiveness from those whom we have hurt. Furthermore, we cannot acquire the art of loving – and it is the finest of the arts – on our own. We need others to love us well and to help us discover who we are. Above all we need the healing grace of God. It is God's Spirit of pure love who is constantly being poured into our hearts.

In today's Gospel the first disciples are keen to get to know Jesus. When they approach him he asks them a penetrating question: 'What are you looking for?' They want to be with him. They want to experience that spring of living water welling up in them to eternal life. In this reflection we could say: they want to direct their energies, including their sexual energy, in ways that are life-giving and liberating and that flower into love. Is that what we want? It was four o'clock in the afternoon when they went off with him and they stayed the rest of the day. Jesus said once: 'Blessed are the pure in heart; they shall see God'. Yes, and they shall see themselves and others, too, with that special clarity and wonder that belong to the pure in heart. This was something Jesus' disciples learned from him. Some begin early the journey of learning to love in a pure way. Others come to him at the 11th hour. It is never too late to go to him and to seek from him a share in his purity of heart. In communion we respond to his invitation: 'This is my body given for you'. May we learn to be as loving and self-giving as Jesus in our sexual self-giving.

I conclude with a sonnet composed by the 17th century English poet, John Donne. He knows that he can never be pure unless and until he is overwhelmed by God's love:

Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurped town to another due,
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
but is captived and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy.
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me' (Holy Sonnets v).