

Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

In today's First Reading, God promises to continue to raise up those who would speak his word to us. We are to listen to them – an injunction repeated in the Responsorial Psalm: 'If today you would listen to his voice!' In today's Second Reading, Paul, inspired by God, recommends to the Christian community in Corinth a special way of loving to which he himself was called, a way of loving that binds a person in an especially intimate relationship to Jesus. He speaks to them of celibate love. Let us listen to this word today, for Jesus may be calling some of us here to follow him in this way of loving.

We often reflect on the special beauty of sexual love when it is an expression of love between two people who have committed their lives to each other. Within the Christian community this committed or married love is a sacrament, making present in the world God's self-giving and life-giving love. Less often do we reflect upon celibate love. This is partly because our society with its distorted view of sex can make no sense of it. Yet, from the beginning of Christianity, men and women have listened to Jesus' call and chosen to love in a celibate way. Why?

The basic reason is that Jesus, the greatest lover the world has known, loved in this way. Jesus' followers have wanted to love the way he loved. Jesus tells us that he chose to love in this way 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven'(Matthew 19:12). His celibate love cast into sharp relief the mystery of his communion with God. It also gave a special power to his witness of God's special, personal and unconditional commitment to each person. Those who approached Jesus did not have to worry that they might be encroaching on his private space. When they were with him they knew that they were special to him. He was able to give them all his attention and all his love. Celibate men and women want to love the way Jesus loved, and to be in the community a sacrament of the total and undivided dedication of Christ in love to the Christian community and to each member of the community without distinction.

All are called to the perfection of holiness. All, therefore, are called to love God with an undivided heart. Love for a spouse or children does not distract from love for Christ, but it remains true that those who forgo married love to devote themselves to Christ and to his mission, drawing their love as they do directly from the heart of Christ, do highlight the power of Christ's love and their whole-hearted dedication to this love.

The person who loves in a celibate way is a symbol and witness also of Christ's complete commitment to his mission to 'draw everyone to myself'(John 12:32). The ultimate nature and urgency of this mission persuaded Paul that it was better to avoid all other commitments to be fully available to go wherever the Spirit of the Lord took him to carry out his mission as herald of the gospel – a mission that meant a 'daily anxiety for all the churches'(2Corinthians 11:28).

We are all longing for something that no one woman, no one man, no particular children, no job, no situation, can satisfy. We long to belong, and we are drawn towards the centre, the unity and the love that holds everything together – we are drawn to the one we call 'God'. For love to be real it must belong to the whole person: the psyche, the emotions and the body.

Experiencing oneself as a sexual person in the committed relationship of marriage thrusts one into the demands of intimacy and often also of parenting: demands that may be avoided, but

not easily and not without failure staring one in the face. The celibate, in transcending such intimacy with its consequent demands upon the whole person, runs the risk of living in an unreal world. If the celibate fails to grow in an adult and nurturing and generative love as a celibate, he or she can be caught in a self-centred existence, and can end up in distracting substitutes that do not satisfy and that do not lead to maturity.

Mature persons are generative. That is, they are able to spend their life in creative communion which is life-giving both to themselves and to those to whom they relate. To be generative, a person must have experienced intimacy: the kind of loving and being loved which is experienced as being the fruit of being deeply known and accepted by another whom we intimately know and accept. To be truly intimate one must have a sense of one's personal identity: a sense of self that is experienced as being affirmed by another who is significant to us. Most people find themselves and experience intimacy through a graced sexual union. However, some are called to a mysterious intimacy with Christ, and so long as they are in touch, so long as they dare to respond authentically to reality, they will experience an amazing generativity. Celibate love can be, for the celibate and for others, a sacrament of divine longing.

Many of us live broken lives, experiencing broken relationships, broken marriages and broken homes. Perhaps one special grace of the celibate is to experience empathy with us, for he or she is also living an 'unfinished' life. A celibate has a heart trained to be with others in their aloneness, without pretending, without hiding brokenness, hurt and incompleteness. A celibate who is able to be alone and know peace can help another lonely person come to know that to be abandoned is not to be alone. No one can take God from us.

We make mistakes in love. We have to live with the knowledge that we have hurt others. It can take a lifetime to learn the greatest of all arts, the art of loving. We have to learn to discipline our love, to lift our love, to love more clearly and more honestly and more truly. A celibate is firstly a man or a woman, needy of love and longing for companionship. A celibate, like every other person, has to live within the limits of real commitments, made to the community, made in the light: commitments that are real and that have come from the deep place where we are most truly ourselves.

Celibate love is very precious, for to be truly loved by a celibate is to be loved just for what we are, with respect and admiration and affection, free from the kind of desire and the expression of need that rightly belong to a sexual relationship. Risky, but refreshing and liberating. Love is not a matter of changing people into what you would like them to be. It is more contemplative. The one who loves sees what the other person already is and could be shown to be with the proper attention and nurturing. Love is committing oneself, dedicating oneself, to work with the other person to bring about that nurturing.

This is what husbands and wives are attempting to do in their relationship. This is what parents and teachers are doing. This is the art in which celibates, too, are involved, for they are committed to being sacraments in this world of the way of loving to which Jesus witnessed, sacraments of the love of God which is open to all, available to all, and delights in all. Celibate love aims to release in this world the sacred mystery of human love that respects and encourages, but that transcends sexual union. Celibate love, lived in a generative way, reminds us that the deepest communion to which we are all called is communion with Jesus 'in the

bosom of the Father'(John 1:18). All true love is a sacrament of this, as is celibate love. If Jesus is calling you to share this kind of loving with him and with those he loves, know that you are being called into a very privileged way of life. I pray you respond generously.