

## Feast of the Sacred Heart, Year A

For the First Reading of today's feast, the Church has chosen one of the loveliest texts from the Book of Deuteronomy. As he is about to die, Moses looks back over his life and reminds the people of all that God has done for them. He reminds them that God has chosen them as his 'special possession' (Hebrew: *segullah*). When I hear this word, I think of a little child that won't let go of a tattered rag doll. Wherever the child goes, the rag doll must go too. Moses is telling us that God is like that with us. He can't let go of us. We find this same intimate claim being made twice more in Deuteronomy (14:2 and 26:18) and also in the Book of Exodus (19:5) and in Psalm 95:4. When the prophet Malachi is reminding us that everyone will have to face judgment for their actions, he says of those who are bound to God in a covenant of love: 'They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children' (Malachi 3:17).

Paul sees this special intimacy with God as something that belongs in a special way to the Christian community when he says that Jesus 'gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself *a people of his own*' (Titus 2:14). Peter writes in the same strain: 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, *God's own people*, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Peter 2:9).

We might wonder why we are so special to God. Moses tells us that it is not because we have some special quality that attracts God to us. A rag doll can be pretty tattered. No, it is because God loves us and because God cannot be unfaithful to the promises that God has made to us. Think of the promises that God made to us when we were conceived. The dignity he gave us simply as a human being, and the mission God gave us to live to the full in making of our life a gift of love, and welcoming the love offered us by others. Think of the promises that God made to us when we were baptised. The dignity that we have as a person called to be Jesus' disciple, and the mission we have to be Jesus' instruments in bring the world to fullness of peace through communion with God. Jesus took us in his arms and gave us his love and said that whatever we might do he would never let us go. I know that we can be unfaithful. We are capable of rejecting the love that he offers to us. But it is a huge reassurance to know that God will never take back the gifts he has given to us. As Paul says: 'If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself' (2 Timothy 2:13). 'The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable' (Romans 11:29).

The Responsorial Psalm spells out six ways in which God has shown us special love.

1. God forgives all our iniquity
2. God heals all our diseases
3. God redeems our life from death
4. God surrounds us with steadfast love and mercy

5. God satisfies us with good as long as we live

6. God vindicates all who are oppressed and assures them of justice.

With our eyes upon Jesus on the cross, we realise that we must look beyond the physical world and physical death to see these promises being fulfilled. If people refuse to heed God's word and receive God's grace, suffering and terrible injustices will continue to be perpetrated in this world. But even were we to be crucified, God will certainly take us into his eternal embrace as he took his only Son.

The Responsorial Psalm goes on to repeat the basic creed of the Old Testament (found also in Exodus 34:6; Psalm 86:5; Psalm 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 2:4 and Nehemiah 9:17): 'The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love'(103:8). The expression 'slow to anger' can be translated 'long-suffering'. The point being made is that God's passionate love keeps on surrounding us even when we continue to sin.

In the Second Reading, John makes explicit something that has been implied throughout his Gospel and Letters. He tells us that 'God is love'(1John 4:8,16). As proof of love for us, 'God sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins'(1John 4:10). John is alluding to the sacrifice carried out by the High Priest on the feast of the Atonement (Yom Kippur) as the culmination of the ten days of fasting, prayer and almsgiving that lead up to the New Year Festival. On that day, the High Priest entered the inner sanctuary of the temple and laid the sins of the people on the mercy seat – the golden throne from which God ruled Israel. The flame of God's merciful love burned the sins to nothing. So it is, John is telling us, that Jesus took us with all our sins into his heart and loved all our sins away. For this reason, says John, we should do the same to others. Take them into our heart and let the love of God which has been given to us bring them forgiveness and so freedom and peace.

This brings us to the Gospel. Jesus has just been rejected by the people among whom he has been ministering. It is with a wounded heart that he cries out to anyone who might wish to listen, inviting them to come to him and find peace. We are reminded of a prayer prayed by Moses:

'Moses said to the Lord, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, "I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight." Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.' The Lord replied, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest"'(Exodus 33:12-14).

Jesus is God's presence among us and in promising his disciples rest for their souls, Jesus is promising them a share in his communion with God. The yoke of the law, laid on their weary shoulders by their religious leaders, is heavy and does not bring them the rest promised by God. The yoke of Jesus, on the contrary, sits easily upon them (Greek *chrēstos* ) for it comes from one who is welcoming and large-hearted, kind and gentle.

Jesus invites us to 'learn from' him for he is 'gentle and humble in heart'. We must not miss the

dramatic juxtaposition of ideas. The one speaking is the Messiah, the one who is fulfilling the law and the prophets and revealing God. He does so, according to Matthew, precisely because he accepts with joy and from the heart his lowly position of total submission to God, his Father. He is 'poor in spirit'(5:3). He is the meek (5:5) and long-suffering Messiah. We have already seen that the yoke of discipleship may ask of us our life (10:39), and will face us with the kind of rejection and persecution suffered by our master (10:25). But it will be a light yoke because he will be by our side, bearing it with us. It will also bring us to the rest for which we long, rest for our souls,

On this Feast of the Sacred Heart, all the Readings invite us to place our trust in God's love as it reaches out to embrace us in the Heart of Jesus.