

## 17th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

Today's Readings invite us to re-examine our goals in life. What am I living for? What do I want in life, for myself? For those I love? Is there something still hidden that if I found it I would give everything up for it? Among the broken and unexplored shells, is there a precious pearl waiting for me that would make all the searching and all the suffering worthwhile?

The Gospel says: Yes, there is. And it is God himself calling me into a close communion of love – a love for which I am made. It is this communion of love that is the only life worth living. Nothing else, however alluring and distracting, can take its place, and to have this intimacy is to have everything. It makes everything worthwhile, for then everything is a sacrament, revealing God.

So, who is this God, so that I might recognise him when I find him? People have come up with many answers: some of them tragically wrong, many of them partly right. The people of ancient Israel, like all other people, had what was necessarily an imperfect grasp of God, but from the initial experience of the Exodus, they came to a basic understanding that is still at the heart of the Judeo-Christian religion. God is one who hears the cry of those who are oppressed. God is one who liberates and who loves. God is one who sees what is. There is no make-believe or pretence in God. If we do evil we will suffer the consequences. However, as the Book of Exodus says, God is forgiving and God is all the time gracing us and inviting us to live in intimacy with him and so to live truthfully and beautifully. This is expressed in a refrain which recurs again and again in the Bible - the key creedal formula expressing their central image of God: 'The Lord passed before Moses, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin'(Exodus 34:6-7). Of course, this awareness was complicated with less perfect images of God, for we human beings find it hard to credit that God could be that wonderful.

Then came Jesus. Most of his contemporaries could not believe that he was revealing God to them. He was too loving altogether, too forgiving, too gentle, too humble and too accepting. He said things like: 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous'(Matthew 5:44-45).

No matter how evil we are, we cannot stop God loving us. Obviously we can refuse to receive God's love. We can live in darkness by our own choice and we can refuse the light. But Jesus knew that God is love and our behaviour does not alter God's loving us. God knows us more intimately and with more affection than a mother or father might dote over a child. How many parents have taken the trouble to count the hairs on a baby's head? But Jesus does not hesitate to use this image for God (Matthew 10:30). Jesus knew that God would leave everything in order to go out and search for someone who had lost his or her way. He adds: 'It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost'(Matthew 18:14).

We are all moved by Jesus' story of the boy who had gone off, but in desperation decided to return home. When he was a long way off, his father ran out to meet him. His greeting was so

loving. Jesus knows what God is like through his own personal intimacy. 'The Father is in me and I am in the Father'(John 10:38; 14:10; 14:20).

The point of our reflections here is that Jesus, the one 'closest to his Father's heart'(John 1:18), invites us to share this same intimacy. When Jesus called his first disciples, he wanted them to share his mission, but first of all he called them to be with him (Mark 3:14). He wanted them as friends. Only if they were close to him would they have anything to give others. Again and again at the last supper Jesus speaks of this invitation to intimacy: 'If you love me my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home in you'(John 14:23). He wanted us to cling to him as a branch clings to the vine (John 15:4). John concludes the last supper with this prayer of Jesus: 'Father, may the love which you have for me be in them, and I in them'(John 17:26).

Paul begs the community in Corinth not to forget that they are a temple, for God's Spirit dwells in them (1Corinthians 6:19). It is this Spirit that causes us to speak to God as a child speaks to its father (Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:15).

Today's First Reading invites us to join Solomon in praying for a heart to know God (1Kings 3:9). The Responsorial Psalm invites us to see ourselves as God's first-born. We are the ones who inherit all that God has. The opening words of the Psalm tell us even more. They encourage us to sing with joy that the gift we receive as God's favourite children is nothing less than God himself (Psalm 119:57). We are most at home when we are being held in grace. Our consolation is in the knowledge that God has promised to be ours and has taken us to be his. We pray: 'Let your love come to me and I shall live'. The word translated 'love' here (rhm) comes from the Hebrew word for womb. We imagine God as our mother whose affection gives life to our soul. We delight in what God reveals of himself to us. We know that we are not very wise. When it comes to the deep mysteries of life we are easily taken in and distracted and confused. But God himself teaches us and our hearts delight in his teaching. All of this speaks of a very intimate relationship with God. As Paul tells us, we are to 'share his glory'(Romans 8:30).

And what about today's Entrance Antiphon? 'God is in his holy dwelling. He will give a home to the lonely'. The light is always burning above the tabernacle, for the risen Christ has chosen to make his home here at the heart of our community, and he welcomes us here whenever we want to come, but especially when we assemble here on the day of the Resurrection. He wants to share his risen life with us, and he wants us to approach the cross and receive his life and his love in communion. There is no need for us to be lonely. He dwells in our hearts. He speaks to us in prayer. The Spirit of love that binds him to God he shares with us.

In the Gospel Jesus tells us that this life of communion with God is like a treasure hidden in a field. It is close to us all. If there is anything holding us back from it, let us give it away and accept the gift of this treasure that God offers us. This is the pearl of great price. Nothing that deprives us of it is worth pursuing.

Or we could look at the parable in a different way. We have pictured ourselves as the one who finds the treasure or the pearl and who gives up everything to obtain it. But what about imagining God as the one who finds the treasure, and the treasure is you and those you love? We do not know the beauty hidden in the fields of our lives. But God does. Jesus came into our

world and discovered a beauty in Mary of Magdala and in Peter and in the leper and in the thief on the cross which they and those around them never suspected. He found it and gave all he had to embrace it and unite it to God. As Paul says: 'he loves me and gives himself for me!'(Galatians 2:20)

We are meant to live a life of intimacy with God. Let us continue our search for truth and for love and for prayer. But let us not forget that God is the one searching for us. Let us stop rushing and hiding and allow God to find us, for our longing for God is only a shadow of his longing for us.