

## 25th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

Today's Responsorial Psalm uses the traditional creedal formula to describe God as 'gracious, merciful, patient and long-suffering, faithful, abounding in love and compassionate to all his creatures.' We find this description in the Book of Exodus and repeated many times in every section of the Bible.

With this in mind, all today's readings encourage us to take stock of how we are responding to this amazing love. The Responsorial Psalm reminds us that God is near, but we must call to him and mean it. God is love, so he will not force himself upon us, but wait to be invited. In the First Reading, Isaiah picks up this theme, encouraging us to seek our gracious God while he may be found, to call on God while he is near. We need God's mercy and we are in great need of God's forgiveness. God is near. Let us not take this closeness for granted but cry out to him, now. While this life continues, God will continue to come to us and to invite us into the vineyard, whether it be early morning, noon, or just an hour away from nightfall. But, as Jesus reminds us in the Gospel, the time will come when it is too late. Furthermore, why would we want to spend much of the day living a half-life or a double-life? Why not live to the full in communion with this loving and life-giving God? Why not follow Paul's advice in the Second Reading and 'live your life in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ'?

We can call on God anywhere and at any time. When we are genuinely sorry for the wrong we have done and are genuinely resolved to listen to God's Spirit and to respond to the grace God is offering us to alter our lives, God's heart is ever ready to forgive. As we read in the Catholic Catechism: 'Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of his grace'(n.1431).

However, knowing this is not enough. Mary of Magdalen was taught this, yet she was still caught up in sin when Jesus met her. If the thief on the Cross received any instruction as a young Jewish boy he would have been taught the truth contained in today's reading from Isaiah and in the Psalm. But what a difference it made when he met Jesus. To hear these truths about God spoken by one as loving as Jesus and to recognise God's gracious forgiveness in Jesus' words and in his manner – this made all the difference. It is for this reason that Jesus stays on in his Church: 'Know that I am with you to the end of time.' 'Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in your midst.' 'Receive the Holy Spirit. When you forgive sin, I forgive it.'

Central to our lives as disciples of Jesus are the sacraments. Yes, we know that God will always respond to our call and come into our hearts when we invite him in. But what a difference, when we come to the altar and receive Jesus, truly present here as the food

and drink for whom we hunger and thirst? It is one thing to hope that our cry is sincere and to believe that God wishes to respond to us. It is another to know in faith that when we receive Holy Communion, Jesus is really and truly, at the very moment that we take him to ourselves, offering himself to us in the sacrament.

Similarly with God's forgiveness. It is one thing to hope that our sorrow is genuine, to trust in God, and to believe in God's forgiveness. It is another to know in faith that Jesus has given the Church the power to forgive, so that when we come to the sacrament of Reconciliation we know that God truly is offering us forgiveness as we hear the words of Jesus spoken through the priest: 'I absolve you from your sins.' Our sorrow must be sincere, and we must have the humility to name our sins, holding them up to Jesus for his healing touch. We must be genuine in our resolve to try to undo harm that we have done as well as to seek in prayer for God's grace to help us avoid repeating our sins. But provided we are genuine and honest, we can be certain that God is in fact forgiving us when we hear words of forgiveness offered in the sacrament, and we can really go in peace, reconciled to God.

The Catechism also reminds us that when we sin we not only offend God; we also hurt the community. Every time we sin we add to the pollution that damages the souls of our brothers and sisters. We make it harder for others to be good. In the sacrament of reconciliation we are also reconciled to the community through its representative, the priest: 'Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offence committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labours for their conversion' (n.1422).

The Catechism states that it is not only individual sinners who need reconciling. The church itself is composed of sinners and fails to be a sacrament of Jesus in the world when, as an institution, it fails in love: 'The Church, clasping sinners to her bosom, is at once holy and always in need of purification, and follows constantly the path of penance and renewal' (n.1428). When we acknowledge our sin and allow Jesus to embrace us in love, we grow in holiness. This has a wonderful effect on our own lives and on the lives of all we love. As the Catechism states: 'The holiness of one profits others, well beyond the harm that the sin of one could cause others' (n.1475).

So what are we to do when we are feeling downcast and helpless, overwhelmed by anxiety or pain? The answer is clear. Jesus tells us that God will keep coming to us to invite us from dawn till dusk to enjoy his love. He began inviting us from the first moment we looked into our mother's eyes and experienced her love. He will still be inviting us when those who love us most are standing around our bed as we prepare to die. In the words of the Responsorial Psalm: 'God is close to all who call on him from their hearts.'