

2nd Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

Last week we contemplated Jesus as the Holy Spirit came down upon him in the Jordan and commissioned him to take to others the experience of God's love that he enjoyed. In today's readings we continue with this theme.

The First Reading takes us back to the Exile, to words which Jesus' disciples often use to express their understanding of Jesus and of his mission. In today's text we are reminded that the people can carry out God's will because God is their strength. We are reminded, too, that their mission is to be an instrument of God's saving grace to the ends of the earth. It is the universal dream of Jesus that is behind the word 'Catholic', and Jesus shows that the power of God at work in his ministry is the power of love.

The Responsorial Psalm expresses the delight experienced by the Psalmist in doing God's will: 'Here I am. I delight to do your will, O God, for it is inscribed in my heart'. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews applies these words to Jesus (Hebrews 10:5-7). Jesus longs to set the world ablaze with God's love and to carry to people, through his actions and through his words, the good news of God's love.

In the Second Reading Paul reminds the community at Corinth that it is by God's will that he is carrying on the mission of Jesus, and each of us could say the same for we are all called, in our own state of life, to tend to the perfection of love and to reach out with this love to others.

Finally, the Gospel is John's account of Jesus' Baptism, with the focus on Jesus' mission of baptising us with the same Spirit that he received at the Jordan River. It is in this way that Jesus frees us, and indeed the whole world, from sin. It is on this key aspect of Jesus' mission that I would like to reflect with you this morning. Let us reflect firstly on what sin is, and then on how Jesus, the Lamb of God, takes away the sin of the world.

Sin is the word we use for anything which blocks us from being completely open to God, the source of our life; anything that is dysfunctional, unloving, untrue, not life-giving. We think of the various kinds of addiction and compulsion that drive us to choices that are not free and that do not flow from the inspiration of God's Spirit. As we know, some of the sin that distracts us and distorts our relationships and causes hurt to ourselves and to others is caused by our own choices. We could act in a kindly way to someone but it is too much effort, or people might misjudge us, or it would involve an inconvenience to ourselves, so we let the opportunity go. That is sin. Or we know we shouldn't judge others or talk about them in ways that put them down, but we get some kind of distorted pleasure from appearing to be smart or from getting the approval of people who are given to knocking others, so we slip in an extra anecdote that puts a person in a bad light. That is sin. We know that certain behaviour is hurting someone but for whatever reason we lack the self-discipline to do anything about it. That is sin. We know we need to find space to be alone with God but we find any excuse to avoid the silence, so we never bother to discern God's will or to open ourselves to God's inspiration or grace. That is sin.

So far I have been speaking of sin for which we are, to some extent at least, responsible. But there is also the huge amount of dysfunctional behaviour that comes from our genes and from the environment in which we were reared and in which we find ourselves. The sea bird cannot

be blamed for the oil slick that clogs up its wings and makes it unable to fly. So much of the sin of the world is environmental and hereditary. We call it Original Sin for it comes, not from our personal will, but from the human condition itself, from our origins. All this is sin and we all need the grace and the love of God to release us from being trapped by it, imprisoned by it, dominated by it.

This brings us to the second question: How does Jesus take this sin away? He does it the way we take darkness away – by turning on the light. He does it the way we take loneliness away - by companionship. He does it the way we take hatred away – by introducing love. It is not an automatic process for we can choose to live in the dark, we can choose to remain isolated; we can harbour hatreds. But Jesus has shown us that there is another way. He not only shows us but he gives us his love and a share in his Spirit and grace to make it possible, should we so wish, for us to do as he does, to live as he lives and to pray and love with his heart.

Last week we watched Jesus being baptised. This week we are invited by the Church to examine the sin that is around us and in our hearts and minds and to know that it is this very sin that Jesus wishes to take away. We will be looking at many of the different faces of sin as we follow Jesus in the church's liturgy throughout the year. Today let us commit ourselves to watch him and to listen to him. He is the vine and we are the branches. There is no doubt that we need pruning, till, whatever our circumstances , we can say with Jesus: 'Here I am. My delight is to do your will, O God, for it is in my heart'.

Each of us could ask ourselves: 'Am I willing to offer him the pruning fork and to ask him to take away my sin?' All pruning is painful, but Jesus shows us that we are in most delicate hands for the gardener of our soul is God himself who made us the way we are and knows us through and through. He knows the best timing and he will never take his love away from us. Let us share in the joy of the blind man who opened his eyes for the first time. Let us share the joy of the man who leaped for joy at Jesus' word of healing. Let us share in the joy of the repentant thief. He couldn't believe his ears when, after a wasted life, he heard Jesus say that he would enjoy paradise 'this very day'. Let us stand with Jesus and allow ourselves to be bathed in the Spirit of love which Jesus longs to share with us.