

4th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

There follow two homilies on the readings of today's Mass. The first focuses on the Opening Prayer and ponders the amazing mystery of the gift of the Holy Spirit by which we receive and offer Jesus' own love. It picks up Jesus' words in the Gospel: 'Blessed are the pure in heart'. The second focuses on the Responsorial Psalm and picks up Jesus' words in the Gospel: 'Blessed are those who suffer in the cause of right.'

Homily 1. Loving with Jesus' love

The prayer of today's Mass is addressed to God our Father and speaks of God forming a people in the image of his Son. We ask that God will reign in our hearts and in our world, and that this may happen we pray: 'May we serve you with our every desire, and show love for one another even as you have loved us.'

There is nothing we long for more than to give and receive love. This is true for each of us. At the heart of parish life is the desire to help provide the environment and the stimulus for every member to learn how to love well.

There are three aspects of love that I wish to underline in this reflection. If any of them is missing, the wonderful impulse to love that is in every human being will be, to some extent, frustrated. Instead of discovering the freedom to give and receive love, we will experience being possessed by others or trying to possess them; we will experience a so-called love that is conditional on our behaviour, or we will offer that kind of conditional love to others; we will sense from others that while they might think they are offering us love, their offer is not focused on us but on themselves, and we will offer to others a similar so-called 'love' that is not real love at all. In each of these situations we will wonder why what we receive and what we give doesn't work and doesn't satisfy: doesn't satisfy us and doesn't satisfy others. It doesn't work and it doesn't satisfy because it is misdirected. Life is a journey of learning to love well. It doesn't happen automatically, and a parish is a very significant place for the learning of the finest art of all: the art of loving.

Eros

The basis of love is expressed by the Greek word 'eros'(desire). We have taken this word into English in the word 'erotic', but tragically this tends to focus on an often distorted expression of sexual desire. Eros includes sexual longing, but it refers to the sentiment expressed in the Prayer: 'May we serve you with every desire'. Little children are full of eros. They want to know everything. They want to do everything. They want to explore everything, and when this primal desire is partly satisfied, they yelp with joy. We all know eros as an unquiet, restless, even wild ache and longing. It is felt as pain and dissatisfaction when it is frustrated. It is felt as a powerful and creative energy when it finds direction. All of us are trying to engage this eros in our liturgy and in every other aspect of parish life and mission. When we do engage it we don't hear the word 'boring', but rather experience the exhilaration of the people's creativity. One of the primary tasks of parish leadership is to keep fine-tuning the system to enable as much eros as possible. Eros is powerful and beautiful when it is pure. In Jesus' words: 'Blessed are the pure in heart'.

Philia

Sometimes this desire issues in what the Greeks call 'philia' (friendship/affection). This can't be organised but it can be nurtured. It is a gift. We can paddle out in the surf on our board, but we have to wait for the wave. We can't produce it, but we can be taught how to catch it when it comes. We can dig out the roots that are clogging the spring and clear the way for the water, but we can't produce the water. We can unfurl the sail, but we can't determine the wind that will fill it and carry us along. A lot of learning (and unlearning) goes into educating a person to be a good friend. All of us are watching to encourage friendship among ourselves and among our acquaintances.

Agape

Love comes to its flowering when we learn to give ourselves to another person just because they need us, without expectation of response, without looking for reward; and when we learn to accept another person's giving themselves to us in the same way. It is something we spend all our life learning.

God is Love

When we say that 'God is love', we are attributing each of these loves to God. The universe is an explosion of God's eros, God's longing for communion, God's passionate desire to give and receive love is limitless. We know this when we watch Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, and when, on the last night of his life we hear him say to his disciples: 'I have longed and longed to share this supper with you before I die'. We see it in the way he reached out to the man dying beside him.

A communion of affection and friendship, too, is an element of divine love. We see this in the life of Jesus. He said to those who shared his vision and his mission: 'You are my friends'. This included Judas as we know when, with tears in his eyes, he held Judas to him and said: 'Friend, why do you betray me with a kiss?'

The perfect love of agape (charity) is seen in Jesus' gift of himself day in and day out, and finally in his determination to give himself in love from the cross. This is the love he received from his Father. This is the love he gives us and asks of us. He asks us to give our real self to God, for it is this love that will enable us to give our real self to others. It is this divine love that liberates the human heart from self-focus and from expecting too much from other weak human beings like ourselves.

Teilhard de Chardin was speaking of this divine love of desire, affection and other-focused love when he wrote in an article on chastity, the virtue that works to keep love pure and untainted: 'Some day, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of Love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire'.

This brings me to the importance of personal prayer, family prayer and parish prayer. I will finish on this note, for the love we long for is the love that burned in the Heart of Jesus: Divine love in

a human heart. Prayer educates us to make space in the busyness and distraction of our lives and to experience the silence that enables us to get in touch with the deepest longings of our heart where God, the source of all love, is offering us a share in his life. As Paul wrote to the Christian community in Rome: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:5).

In his poem 'A Letter to John Dryden' James McAuley, one of Australia's leading lyric poets, speaks to Jesus and prays:

Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,
Cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives
Among us, who walk within the fire
Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land:
Distracted men that sow their hopes in sand
Will sometimes feel an evanescent sense
Of questioning, they do not know from whence.
Prayer has an influence we cannot mark,
It works unseen like radium in the dark.

Create moments of creative silence in your heart, in your home and here in our family's spiritual home. It is in prayer that we discover who we are, how loved we are. Prayer is communion with Jesus, who gives us his love to draw us into communion with God and with each other.

Homily 2. Blessed are those who suffer in the cause of right: theirs is the kingdom of heaven

In today's Responsorial Psalm, we have expressed our faith in ten beautiful statements about God. We have said that God is just to the oppressed, that God gives bread to the hungry, that God sets prisoners free. We go on to say that God gives sight to the blind, raises up those who are bowed down, protects the stranger and upholds the widow and the orphan. We conclude by stating that God thwarts the wicked. The Psalmist sums up his faith by declaring that 'The Lord keeps faith for ever.' There are times when we wonder are these statements true.

Our own everyday experience, plus what we see on television or at the cinema or read in the newspaper, makes it hard to believe them. Many strangers, widows and orphans are not receiving justice. Many people are starving. There are prisoners of conscience, there are people old and young who are living hopeless lives because they do not see – their eyes remain closed to anything better. Our own personal lives often seem to give us reason to question the kinds of statements we have just made from the psalm. In our extended families and among our friends there is so much hurt caused by what can rightly be called wickedness. Does God really thwart the path of the wicked? On the other hand we are encouraged to believe these statements and to repeat them in our liturgy today because the author of the psalm clearly believed what he was saying, and generation after generation of Jews and then Christians have repeated his words. This way of thinking about God is found also in the words from Zephaniah in today's First Reading.

It may be helpful to reflect on three different kinds of suffering. Firstly, there is the suffering

that comes with death and with the process that leads to death. This process varies from person to person and we all experience some level of revulsion when we experience the breakdown of our physical wellbeing and face the end of the only kind of life we have known. At the same time we know that death is part of being human. While we thank God for the advances of medical science and even more so for the love and care of those around us, we know that we all must die. It is no argument against the goodness of God. The experience of Jesus causes us to reach out in hope to the one who promises to raise us to himself in an eternal communion of love.

Secondly, there is the suffering that we bring upon ourselves when we act in thoughtless, distracted and dissipated ways with no regard for God's will and therefore with no regard for our own deepest needs. God is offering us all the graces that are listed in today's psalm. It is because we and others ignore these graces that we suffer so much.

Thirdly, there is the suffering that we experience because of what other people do to us. Reflection on Jesus' life shows clearly that even saintly goodness is no protection against this kind of suffering – and it makes up most of the suffering that our world experiences. If everyone was as pure and beautiful and loving as Jesus imagine all the suffering that would be removed from the world. Certainly, this suffering, too, cannot be blamed on God. The fact is that, though we are made by love and made for love, we are able to reject love. We have an inherent wayward impulse to seek to satisfy our own felt needs even at the expense of losing love.

God is love. God, therefore, does not impose his will or exercise mechanical control over our lives. God made us to be free and respects our freedom. God does not control. Rather God inspires and loves. God is always working to bring good out of evil, but God does not stop our free choices and so he does not intervene to stop the suffering consequent upon the bad choices that we make. If we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus. When Jesus gazed upon the city he loved, he did not stop the sins of the people, he wept. We should think of God as weeping over the evils in the world, and offering us all the love we need to cure the causes of suffering. We will avoid the suffering that we bring upon ourselves and others by our sin, and we will be able to bear the suffering which is inflicted upon us by the sin of others if we learn to love as Jesus loved. This brings us to today's Gospel in which Jesus gives us an intimate insight into the essential qualities of his heart: the way in which he relates to God and so the way in which he relates to us. Jesus is inviting his disciples to be like him.

Jesus is 'poor in spirit' – that is to say, he realises that he does not have in himself the resources to live as he longs to live. He needs God's love with every fibre of his being, and, like a child, he reaches up to accept the loving embrace he knows God is giving him. He begins by inviting us to be like him in this and assures us that if we are we will experience the reign of God's love in our lives. The last beatitude talks about suffering. We see Jesus on the cross as he continues to believe even though he feels abandoned by God. We have to learn to do the same. Trusting when everything is going fine is a beautiful thing, but things are often not going fine for a host of reasons. Jesus wants to share with us his trust that God is there when others have abandoned us and when we are desolate and tempted to despair.

All the beatitudes in between these two are in the future sense. Gentleness will not always succeed here and now, but Jesus promises us that it will win through in the end. We may be in mourning now, grieving for all that we continue to lose, but the tears will be wiped away, says

Jesus. Trust me, he says, and continue to trust God. We may not be satisfied in our hunger for justice, truth, security and love, but if we keep our hearts open to God he will fill them – a hundredfold here on earth and eternal life on the other side of death. The measure of our longing for goodness, truth and justice will be the measure of our joy when we are taken into the embrace of the God who loves us. Jesus urges us to keep on being merciful and forgiving of others. If our hearts are open to feel with others and to reach out to them, our hearts will be open to receive God's overflowing compassion poured out upon us. He urges us to keep on allowing the sufferings that come our way to purify our hearts.

God doesn't want us to suffer, but circumstances continue to cause us pain. Can we remain trusting when we are hurting? Does suffering soften our heart and teach us compassion? Can we learn that we can keep on loving even with a pierced heart? Suffering hurts. If we can stay open to love, then the pain will purify our hearts till we learn to see God, to see God everywhere and finally face to face. If we risk the task of reconciling, of making peace, we will ourselves experience the peace of Jesus himself.

Notice that the focus of the Gospel takes us back to the message of the Responsorial Psalm. The focus is on God, for God alone is the source of the blessedness that comes to us when we allow the Spirit of Jesus to train our hearts to be like his. Let us pray for each other that we may renew our faith in the truth that the Lord does keep faith with us forever. This Lord dwells in the depths of our soul and in the midst of this community, especially as we gather here to relive the passion of Jesus and to receive the Spirit of divine love from his pierced and broken heart – for this is the gift of communion. John of the Cross expresses this very beautifully in his Spiritual Canticle, addressing each one of us (1.7): 'O most beautiful of creatures, transcendent spirit, who long to know where your beloved is and where you may find him so as to be united with him. He dwells within you. You are yourself the tabernacle, his secret hiding place. Rejoice, exult, for all you could possibly desire, all your heart's longing is so close, so intimate as to be within you; you cannot *be* without him.'