

Feast of the Sacred Heart, Year C

The Church is often likened to a mother. Recognising this truth, many parish communities have consecrated themselves to the most beautiful mother of all, Mary, the Mother of Jesus. We think of her as the one who loved him most, and who remains closest to his heart. She is our Mother, our Lady of the Sacred Heart. Today's feast is therefore an occasion to come together with Mary and as part of our mother, the Church, to express our gratitude to God for the love of the Heart of Jesus.

Father Jules Chevalier, who founded the religious family of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in 1854, wrote a few years later: 'The Heart of the divine Master is the centre on which everything in the Old and New Testament converges, the pivot around which everything in Catholicism turns, the sun giving light to the Church. the soul of our souls, the source of our mysteries, the spring from which our sacraments well up. His heart is the pledge of our reconciliation, the salvation of our world, the remedy of all our ills. That is how I understand devotion to the Sacred Heart: it embraces everything, it is the answer to everything'(Letter to Father Ramière SJ, 1962).

In his book on the Sacred Heart, published in 1900, he wrote: 'From the heart of Jesus pierced on Calvary, I see a new world coming forth: a great and life-giving world, inspired by love and mercy; a world which the Church must perpetuate on the whole earth'.

The Catholic Catechism (1992) recalls the teaching of Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Haurietis Aquas* (1956), and states: 'The Sacred Heart of Jesus, pierced by our sins and for our salvation, 'is quite rightly considered the chief sign and symbol of that ... love with which the divine Redeemer continually loves the eternal Father and all human beings'[*Haurietis Aquas*] without exception'(n.478).

There is a special feeling about the readings chosen for this feast in our current liturgical cycle (Year C). It is expressed in the psalm chosen for today – the well-known Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd. Behind this psalm is the experience of God's people journeying through the desert and then being welcomed by God into the land flowing with milk and honey. God is the one who guided them on their journey and was there at their darkest moments, caring for them. God it was who welcomed them into his tent and who prepared a banquet for them. The psalmist remembers this and trust that God's goodness and kindness will always be there for him, too, guiding him throughout his life's journey: 'I am sure that his goodness and kindness will follow me all the days of my life'.

You are familiar with the words of Jesus in John chapter 10, where he speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd, and in today's gospel Luke recalls Jesus' parable of the shepherd going out to find the sheep that has strayed.

No one brings out this aspect of Jesus' love and ministry better than Matthew. It is Matthew who reminds us that Jesus 'will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick'(12:20). He tells us that Jesus 'had compassion for the crowds, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd'(9:36). There are those who lay the heavy yoke of the Law upon the shoulders of those who are too weak and too confused to be able to bear it. Bowed down

under so impossible a burden, sinners looked lost and without hope. It is to these, precisely these, that Jesus cried:

'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light'(11:28-30).

It is this same compassion that we are committed to show each other in this our parish family. Whatever may or may not happen in the wider church, we must do all we can to ensure that here no one feels a stranger, no one is turned back from the welcoming arms of Jesus. All of us, whatever our sin, must know that we have a home here where Mary has made a home for her Son, and where his heart is free to love without constraint.

Before we re-consecrate ourselves to his Heart*, I would like, by way of conclusion, to share with you a poem written on the Feast of the Sacred Heart in 1895 by Saint Therese of Lisieux.

1. At the holy sepulchre Mary Magdalene
Seeking her Jesus, was bowed in tears.
The angels tried to soften her pain
but nothing could calm her sorrow.
It is not you, luminous archangels
whom this ardent soul has come to seek.
She wants to see the Lord of angels
to take him off in her arms far from this place

2. Beside the tomb, the last to remain,
she had come well before dawn.
Her God came too, veiling his light,
Mary could not outdo him in love!
Showing her first his blessed face,
soon a single word welled up from his heart
whispering her name so gently: "Mary"
Jesus gave her peace, happiness.

3. One day, O my God, like Magdalene,
I wanted to see you, to approach you.
My eyes searched the immense open spaces
whose Master and King I longed to see.
I cried out as I gazed on the pure wave,
the blue star, the flower and the bird:
"If I do not see God, O brilliant nature,
You are for me only a vast tomb".

4. I need a heart burning with tenderness,
who will remain my support, loving
everything about me, even my weakness,
never leaving me, night or day".

I have been unable to find any creature
who would love me always, without dying.
I need a God who takes my nature,
becomes my brother and can suffer!

5. You heard my cry, my only Lover.
You ravished my soul, becoming mortal.
You poured out your blood, Mystery sublime
And you live still for me upon the altar.
If I cannot see the brightness of your face
nor hear your voice, so full of gentleness,
I can still, O my God, live in your grace.
I can rest on your Sacred Heart!

6. O Heart of Jesus, treasure of tenderness,
You are my happiness, my only hope.
You know how to charm my tender youth.
Stay here beside me till the final evening,
O Lord, to you alone I have given my life
And all my desires are known to you.
It is in your goodness, forever infinite,
that I wish to lose myself, O Heart of Jesus!

7. Ah! I know it well, all our acts of virtue
have no value in your eyes.
To give value to my sacrifices
I cast them into your divine Heart.
You did not find the angels without stain.
You gave the Law amid flashes of lightning.
In your Sacred Heart, Jesus, I hide.
I am not afraid. You are my virtue!

8. To be able to contemplate your glory,
I know that we must pass through fire.
For myself, I choose for my purgatory
Your burning love, O Heart of my God!
My exiled soul, on leaving this life,
Wants to make an act of pure love.
And then, flying off the heaven, its home,
To enter, without delay, into your Heart!

DAILY PRAYER OF JULES CHEVALIER (adapted)

Lord Jesus, you are the Saviour of the world and the source of all holiness Look with kindness upon all whom you have called to share in the mission of your heart. Intercede for us with your Father, that he may keep us safe in your love. Consecrate us in the truth, so that you may be glorified in us, and that our lives may reflect the sentiments of your heart.

Our mission is in the world. Plead with your Father to keep us from evil, so that we may remain united by the bonds of the strongest love. As you are one with your Father, may we also be one with each other in your divine heart. To this same divine heart, whose sentiments shall ever be ours, WE NOW CONSECRATE OURSELVES for time and for eternity. AMEN