

## Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C

I would like to spend this time with you reflecting on the first stanza of today's Responsorial Psalm: 'O God, be gracious and bless us and let your face shed its light upon us. So will your ways be known upon earth, and all nations learn your saving help'(Psalm 67:1-2)

What does it mean to ask God to be gracious? God cannot be anything else. It is God who is holding us in being instant by instant of our existence. If that were not the case we would simply cease to be. We are familiar with the Biblical imagery that expresses this truth very beautifully. Aware of the precarious nature of our life, the author of Genesis speaks of us being formed by God out of the surface dust of the earth. Just imagine what would happen if God were to withdraw his hands! We only hold together because God continues to hold us and embrace us in his care. We are alive because God continues to breathe into us the breath of life. In asking God to be gracious, we are really encouraging each other to remember who we are, so that we will remember who it is that is holding us in existence, and allow ourselves to be held and embraced, so that we will not forget to breathe in, as it were, and know where our life is coming from.

But that is not all. Not only is God holding each of us in existence now, and giving us life now, God is also inviting us to share in the love which is God's very own life: the love that is given by the Lover, the love that is received by the Beloved, the love that is the union of the Lover with the Beloved: the love that is the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However we strive to imagine it, the truth is that God is a communion in love, and God wants to grace us all by drawing us to an intimate sharing in this communion. This is expressed beautifully in the opening words of today's Gospel: 'If you love me you will keep my word, and my Father will love you, and we shall come to you and make our home with you'(John 14:23,27).

When we ask God to be gracious, we are not asking God to keep on offering us this intimate communion. It is of the very nature of God to keep offering love. Nothing we have ever done, nothing we could ever do, could change that. What we are asking is that we might remember this offering and open our hearts to receive it, and keep on offering ourselves to be loved. The key is to believe this even when our circumstances incline us to forget it and to give up hope. When that happens we are tempted to seek love and to seek happiness elsewhere. We are told (wrongly) that it is important to trust our own hearts even when they are prey to wayward desires and wrong ideas. We are tempted to try to secure our own happiness independent of our reliance on God. Jesus tells us that if we seek to secure our own life we will lose it, but we forget these words, or just don't trust them.

Sometimes other people treat us badly and we feel not accepted and cheated, and we lose hope in the value of our lives. We watch Jesus on the cross, but it is not easy to learn the lesson that what other people do or do not do to us cannot separate us from God's love, and so ultimately cannot harm us. The only thing that can harm us is to lose faith in God's love. This is brought out very powerfully in the gospels where we are invited to contemplate Jesus calming the sea, then calming the deranged man, then raising Jairus's daughter to life (Mark 4:35 - 6:6).

There is a lot of pain in our lives, some of it caused by the failure of others, even those closest to us, who fail to know us and trust us and love us. Some of it is caused by our own failures. Pain is pain and it cannot be wished away. If we forget who we are as creatures of God and that God is

inviting us to share in his life of love even in the midst of life's suffering, then pain can drive us to despair, or to behaviour which compounds the situation and wedges us further and further into the mess. If we remember that God is holding us in existence, that God is always present in every circumstance gracing us, supporting us, and holding us in love, and that God will never let us be tried beyond our strength, then we will be able to look for the grace that is present and draw the strength from it to cope and to grow in love even in the most trying of circumstances. When we ask God to be gracious, we are reminding ourselves of God's love and directing our attention to draw on the grace that is certainly present.

We go on to pray that God will bless us: 'O God, be gracious and bless us.'. This is really a prayer that our lives will be fruitful, which is another way of saying that, whatever our circumstances, we will be able to love, for since God is love, loving is the only thing that is truly fruitful. If we want our lives to be a success, then we must not forget that the only success worthy of a human being is success in love. This does not mean that relationships in which we have invested a lot of hope will necessarily remain: it takes two to sustain a relationship. It means that whatever others may do and whatever mistakes we may make we will always turn to God and open our hearts for God's forgiveness and grace, and blessing - so that we will find the best way of loving in the limited circumstances of our lives. Remember the widow's mite (see Mark 12:41-44). She gave the best gift because she gave all she had.

We then pray: 'Let your face shed its light upon us'. This touches upon our deepest need. We are made for God and our hearts are restless till they rest in Him. We are made by love and for love and the only love that can satisfy our desire is the experience of communion with God. We long to be part of the loving that is God and that is the essence of all existence. All the loves that we experience here are necessarily fragile and imperfect, for we are all only learning to love and we can all fail.

The prayer of this psalm is echoed by Philip at the Last Supper when he said to Jesus: 'Show us the Father and we will be satisfied'(John 14:8). Jesus replied: 'Do you know that I am in the Father and the Father is in me ... To see me is to see the Father'(John 14:9-10). Thanks to the gift of our Christian faith we have a sure way of living that faces us towards God whose 'face' we will one day see without a veil obscuring our vision. This is to gaze upon the face of Jesus, to watch him loving and to learn from him the way to the Father, for it is the glory of God that is shining on the face of Jesus (2Corinthians 4:6). Remember Mary of Magdala at the tomb (John 20:11-18). She saw the Risen Jesus because she refused to stop searching for him.

The second reading of today's Mass focuses our attention on the Church: the Bride of Christ, the community of those loved by him and nourished by him in the Eucharist. We are reminded of the wonderful gift which we have received from God - to be invited to belong to the community in which Jesus dwells in a special way: the community of those whom he calls his brothers and sisters. This brings us to the words of today's psalm. We ask God to be gracious to us and to bless us and let his face shine upon us. Why? Not just for our own personal satisfaction, but so that: 'your ways will be known upon earth and all nations will learn your saving help'.

Today we are conscious of learning to respect cultures that are other than our own. This is good, but we must not forget that not everything about a culture is good. Every culture, including our own, needs to experience constant conversion away from the build up of sin that infects it. This

is brought out in today's first reading. If only society knew that God is love and that the reality of God is found in the experience and the words of Jesus, then culture would be a wonderful force for good. To the extent that we are blind to this, and insist on people's so-called rights even when those rights are destructive of persons and of society, we will keep polluting the spiritual air that we breathe and putting up barriers to God's grace and blessing.

While remembering the mission to the world that we have as disciples of Jesus, let us thank God for the energy of love that we find in the community of the Church and pledge ourselves to invite others to come into the fold where we will find plenty of sin, because it is a home of sinful human beings, but where we will find also the glory of God's love shining forth as we are fed by the Eucharist and healed through the sacraments. If we are disciples of Jesus we will want to help his dream come true, that the will of God will be done on earth. This will happen to the extent that God's ways are known upon earth through the loving lives that God inspires us to live.