

5th Sunday of the Year, Year C

For two thousand years the Sunday Mass has been the most important time when Christians have come together to celebrate and renew their communion with the crucified and risen Jesus and with each other. We talk about the Sunday obligation. The word obligation comes from the Latin word *ligare* meaning 'to bind', with the prefix *ob* meaning 'in close contact with'. An obligation, then, is a strong and close bond that holds people together. In this case it is a love-bond, for we need to celebrate and renew our communion with Jesus and we need to celebrate and renew our communion with each other. I need your faith to sustain and strengthen me and it is very loving of you to come and pray with me, and you need my faith to sustain you and I come because I love you. We need each other as a family of faith, and receiving Jesus' love together we are strengthened to carry out the mission he gave us to love one another as he loves us and to go out, each of us into our own area of the world, to take this same love to others.

There is a certain sameness about each Sunday Mass, for we do not come to be entertained. We come to meet others in our faith-family, to pray with each other and to receive the risen Jesus in the extraordinary intimacy of communion. We come also to listen to God speaking to us and it is the word spoken to us that makes each Sunday Mass special. The three readings of today's Mass have a very strong common theme. The Church is inviting us to listen and to reflect on what these readings might mean to us in our lives.

The first reading is from the Hebrew poet, Isaiah. He was a person with a marvellous gift with words. God had given him this gift for his own and other's enjoyment. But, as we know, we can use our God-given gifts in trivial ways. We can ever abuse them for our own selfish ends, hurting ourselves and others in the process. God wanted Isaiah to use his poetic gifts to speak words that came out of his communion with God. In other words he wanted him to be a prophet. So what had to happen? Isaiah uses a dramatic image to tell us that God had to purify his lips so that his words would come from the deepest part of his soul and breathe God's holiness and truth to others. The word 'purify' comes from the word 'fire'. It is a painful process, ridding us of our own inflated ego, our pride and pettiness and self-serving. Isaiah expresses the pain of this experience by speaking of an angel burning his lips with hot coals from the fire.

As God speaks to us here this morning, he is asking us to look at the special gifts he has given us, and to ask ourselves how are we using them. He is also reminding us not to be surprised when suffering comes into our lives, and assuring us that, however unjust and painful the suffering may be, He will never fail us or abandon us, and if we call to him in prayer, the suffering can strengthen our faith and purify the very gifts he has given us. Just as a seed-pod has to break open so that seeds can spread and take root, so our hearts, when pierced and broken like that of Jesus on the cross, can give and receive more love. This is what the psalmist says in today's responsorial psalm: 'On the day I called, you answered, you increased the strength of my soul' (Psalm 138:3). The suffering

makes us realise our need for grace and our dependence on God. We cry out to him and, at a time that is best for us, he answers our prayer. The trial has strengthened our soul and purified our heart.

The second reading picks up the same theme. It is from Paul. Paul's gifts were very different from those of Isaiah. Paul was no poet, but he was a man with a brilliant mind, an extraordinary capacity for friendship and a passionate concern for the truth. He was a Pharisee, highly trained in observant Judaism, but also educated in the Greek Stoic tradition. He could have gone to the top in any field to which he applied himself. But God wanted him to use these gifts to translate the message of Jesus from the Jewish culture within which Jesus and his immediate followers lived, so that it would make sense to and capture the hearts of people throughout the Roman Empire. God wanted him to use his mind and heart not for his own self-satisfaction, but for the richest of purposes. But just as Isaiah's lips had to be purified for him to speak God's words, so the mind and heart of Paul had to go through the crucible of suffering if he was going to have the mind and heart of Jesus and the strength and courage for the astonishing vocation to which God was calling him.

You are familiar with the way in which Luke, Paul's friend and co-worker, dramatises Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. He tells us that Paul was blinded. Luke is not concerned with his eyes. He is talking primarily about his mind. Paul had to come to realise that, with all his learning, he knew nothing. He had to experience a collapse of his mind so that he would never be moved to pride, thinking that it was his own genius that gave success to his ministry. He was humbled. He had to join the very community that he was determined to wipe out in God's name and humbly accept baptism from the simple, loving old man, Ananias. He had to suffer the pain of being ostracised from the Jewish community that he loved so much.

We are astonished by the suffering that was in Paul's life, but when we read his writings we hear him say, again and again, that he wouldn't want it any other way. His mind and heart were so purified that he could experience an intimacy with Jesus and with others that called upon and sanctified the very depths of his being. Once again we might reflect on the gifts God has given us, and when suffering comes our way, see this as God's instrument in drawing us closer to him and deepening our capacity for love.

Finally, the Gospel has the same message. Peter was a fisherman, good at his trade. God wanted him to use his honesty, his capacity for hard-work, his gift for friendship and leadership, to attract people rather than fish, and to dare to go out of his depth to draw strangers into the boat – symbol of the Church of Jesus' disciples.

Peter, like Isaiah and Paul, had to experience failure, so that he would realise that any success he had as an apostle and as the leader of the community came from God and not from his own gifts. Luke the dramatist expresses this in a powerful image. We see Peter fishing, and he is out for the whole of a long night, unable to catch anything.

Humbled by his failure, he acknowledges his lack of ability to Jesus. He is then ready to use his God-given gifts for a life beyond the wildest dreams of any Galilean fisherman.

If you can find time today to reflect for yourselves on the message of today's Mass, and especially if you are now experiencing failure or suffering in your life, you might like to take as the theme of your prayer the last verse of today's Responsorial Psalm. However, I recommend that you go to your Bible where you will find it as Psalm 138, rather than the missal which leaves out a very important line. The full text reads: 'You stretch out your hand and save me, your hand will do all things for me. The Lord will fulfil his purpose for me [this line is not in the missal text]. Your love, O Lord, is eternal, discard not the work of your hands'(Psalm 138:7b-8).

We are reminded today that the Lord will fulfil his purpose for us. And God's main purpose for us is to love us, as we see in the father in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son and his brother. We each have our own special gift given to us so that we can live rich, fulfilling lives. We will experience pain, just like Isaiah, Paul and Peter, but God says to each of us what he said to Joshua: 'I will lead you, I will be with you, I will not fail you or forsake you. Have no fear. Let nothing dishearten you'(Deuteronomy 31:8 adapted).

Let Paul have the last say: 'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ'(Philippians 1:6). So, let us be patient in our suffering, allow God to purify us, and pray that everything will finally be turned into love.