

## Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

For us as Christians, faith means the acceptance of the truth that God is as Jesus revealed God to be. In other words, I have Christian faith when I believe that God is love - the kind of love revealed in the life of Jesus. If we truly accepted that, then we would experience the wonder and the joy and the peace of being a son or daughter of God. We would know that, whatever happens to us, we can rely on God to sustain us and support us and heal us and delicately and passionately love us. It is easy perhaps to kid ourselves that we have this faith. The readings of today's Mass invite us to examine our lives carefully as to whether or not our faith is real.

There are many pressures in our society that try to convince us that we ought to be self-reliant and not dependent on others for our security. However, life itself is constantly facing us with situations in which the supposed sources of our security are taken from us. We have a choice. We can either learn, like the author of today's psalm, to trust in God when we experience our helplessness, and so gradually mature in our faith, or we can engage our energies in avoiding the opportunities of growth which life provides, and struggle unsuccessfully to find our security either in ourselves or in other fallible human beings.

It is perhaps worth taking a quick glance at some of the more important moments of change and growth in our lives. A woman who has a healthy life-style, who is loved and at peace provides in her womb a wonderfully secure environment in which we have our first experiences as human beings. The time comes, however, when we are forcibly ejected from this environment. We have no choice. Hopefully we enter into the loving environment created largely but not only by our parents. There we first learn that we are valued. We bond with our mother and then our father. In adolescence these bonds too have to be broken, not in the sense that we have to reject those who have loved us so beautifully, but in the sense that we have to learn that we are separate from them. We have to discover our own person, and this happens by trial and error. It is often scary and lonely and experimental. We have to let go the total security of the child. It was good and necessary when it was there, but to mature we have to let it go and our parents have to let us let it go. We are learning that our security can't just be in our parents.

Later we experience falling in love, and for a while it seems that he or she can give me back the security for which I long. The experience of being loved for myself is important and energizing. However, marriage soon reveals that this other person is weak like me, and wounded and has faults and can't love me completely the way I'd like to be loved. He or she finds me the same. Hopefully our relationship is good, but I learn that it cannot provide ultimate security for me. I have to find my basic security somewhere else.

Children come, but they too eventually go. Work may fulfil many needs, but then comes retirement and failing health. We are constantly coming up against experiences which, if we are honest and face them truthfully, show up our inherent weakness, both physical and psychological. Life is teaching us that we are not self-sufficient. It is also teaching us that we can't find our ultimate security in the love of others, even our parents, our spouse or our children.

It is here that the example and the message of Jesus encourages us to let go our reliance on our selves and on others, and humbly and urgently cry out to God in our distress. God always

responds to our cry, and we can gradually learn that our lives are truly in God's hands and that God cares for us, sustains us and loves us. It is in this faith alone that we find peace. Ultimately, even life as we know it is taken from us. Just as we were forced from the womb into this world, so we cannot finally resist the power of death. A life of faith teaches us to do what Jesus did and to entrust our lives into the hands of our loving Father.

The Responsorial Psalm of today's Mass (Psalm 116:1-9) opens with the beautiful statement: 'I love the Lord for he has heard the cry of my appeal. He stretched out towards me on the day when I called to him'. The inspired author goes on to say: 'I was helpless, so he saved me'.

If the last supper was a Passover meal, this is the psalm mentioned by Matthew (26:30) which Jesus and his disciples would have sung together immediately after the meal. Strengthened by it, Jesus went to his agony in the garden and his passion.

This is the theme of the first reading. There we witness a person suffering unjust persecution, physical suffering, loss of reputation and shame. He believes that the Lord is coming to help him and so he finds the courage to remain in peace. The verses following the text chosen for today's Mass warn the reader to trust in God and to walk in the darkness of faith. If we try to light our own way the fire we have lit will end up consuming us (Isaiah 50:10-11).

The Responsorial Psalm to which we have already referred has as its theme our walking in the presence of the Lord (even though it is in darkness).

The reading from the Letter of James reminds us that if we truly believe that God is as loving as Jesus has shown us, then we will do all in our power to bring this love to others. Our actions reveal how genuine our love is.

In the gospel, Peter assures Jesus that he really loves him. Jesus tells Peter that true love is shown when things are hard. Jesus' life, like ours, was not all easy. He was rejected and despised and lied about. People refused to believe him or to trust him or to change their behaviour towards one another in the light of his teaching. So he goes on to warn Peter that he must expect to find love in hard places. God wants us to live just as he wanted Jesus to live, and, despite the way he was treated, Jesus trusted that God would preserve his life, for that is who God is.

In the dramatic account of the revelation of God on Mount Sinai, God told Moses that he would appear in all his glory 'on the third day'(Exodus 19:11). Using the same expression, Jesus tells Peter that whatever is happening to him now (today), and whatever might happen to him in the future (tomorrow), 'on the third day' - that is on the day when God reveals God's power and love - he will live.

He goes on to tell the disciples that he wants them to live, and that they should not fear losing their life because of him. They, like him, will certainly live if they place their trust in God.

So, can we learn this lesson? Can we accept our own limitations as life gradually reveals them to us? Can we stop expecting other people to fill all the gaps as though they owed us a living? Can we stop being hard on our parents, or our spouse, or our children when they are unable to fulfil

our expectations? Can we learn to pray and to cry out to God in our distress and then to wait patiently for God to answer our prayer, trusting that God knows the time and the place for love that is best for us?

Saint Francis de Sales has this to say: 'Do not look forward to what might happen tomorrow. The same everlasting Father who cares for you today will take care of you tomorrow and every day. Either he will shield you from suffering, or he will give you unfailing strength to bear it. Be at peace then, and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginings.'

Let us listen, too, to John of the Cross: 'When something distasteful or unpleasant comes your way, remember Christ crucified and be silent. Live in faith and hope, even though you are in darkness, because it is in these darkneses that God protects the soul. Cast your care upon God, for God watches over you and will not forget you. Do not think that God leaves you alone; that would be an affront to Him.'

And finally, the medieval English mystic, Julian of Norwich: 'He did not say, "you shall not be tempest-tossed, you shall not be work-weary, you shall not be discomforted." But he did say, "You shall not be overcome," God wants us to heed these words so that we shall always be strong in trust, both in sorrow and in joy.'

I suggest that, in the light of today's readings, we might check our lives to see whether or not we do spend some time each day reflecting on our day and explicitly making an act of faith in God, entrusting ourself to God and opening our mind and heart to God's grace. How can we learn to trust God if we never seriously attend to God?