

Twenty-seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

The film *Shadowlands* movingly portrays the relationship between C.S. Lewis and the American poet, Joy Davidman. Their close friendship began just after she had been diagnosed as having cancer and they were both aware of some of the risks involved in embarking on an intimate relationship in these circumstances. As it turned out they had three very happy years of married life together. Before her death Lewis wrote: 'Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. You must lock it up safe in the coffin of your selfishness. If you do that, your heart will change. It will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to the risk of tragedy is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell'.

Reflecting on what it means to be human, the author of today's First Reading pictures God as a potter forming us out of the dust of the earth – the dust to which we return at death. For, indeed we are part of this beautiful but fragile earth. We are born, we grow, we decline and we die. There is much about us that is heavy and drags us down. There is much about us that is fragile and breaks. There is much about us that struggles to endure, but that must face the letting go of age, and the dissolution of death. We belong to the earth and return to it.

However, there is so much more to us than this. We have a divine fire within us. We reach for the stars. We dream of the infinite. We have God's breath in our lungs and God's love in our hearts. And so the same author pictures God giving us the kiss of life, breathing his love into us, giving us this wonderful experience that we call life.

It is here that today's reading takes up the story. We human beings are made in God's image: we are not meant to be alone. In the words of John Donne: 'No man is an island'. The author of the Genesis story paints a striking picture of our incompleteness. Adam is left with his rib (his heart) torn from his body. Eve is torn from where she belongs. Both experience a profound longing (we call it sexual desire) to come together, for only together can we be whole. The first words spoken by the human race in the Genesis story are the words of delight expressed in today's reading, when man and woman recognise in each other the fulfilment of their longing.

This is not the only way to fulfil this need for the other. Today we are more aware

of homosexual attraction and we are learning to respect it. We are also aware of many ways in which people can forgo sexual love in committing their lives to aged parents, to careers that involve much loving and much collaborative work to improve the human condition. Thanks to Jesus, we recognise also the gift of celibate love in which women and men consecrate their lives to God and offer themselves to the human community in special ways of devoted service.

People can come to maturity and find fulfilment in all these ways, for essentially they are all ways of living in love. We are not meant to be alone.

In the Second Reading (Hebrews 2:9-11) we look at Jesus reaching out to belong and to give himself in love. The author makes the same point as C.S.Lewis. To love is to open ourselves to suffering. There is no other way. Jesus himself, we are told, was made perfect through suffering. There is a lot of suffering in heterosexual love. There is a lot of suffering in homosexual love. There is a lot of suffering in the love lived by a single person and in consecrated celibate love. None of us grows to maturity by running away from the reality of our lives, and this includes the pain. Kahlil Gibran writes: 'Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding. Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain. Could you but keep your heart in wonder at the daily miracles of life, your pain would not seem less wondrous than your joy, and you would accept the seasons of your heart, even as you have always accepted the seasons that pass over your fields. You would learn to watch with serenity through the winters of your grief. The cup of suffering, though it burn your lips, has been fashioned of the clay which the Potter has moistened with his own sacred tears'(The Prophet).

It is not good for us to be alone. However, inevitably, death comes to us all and separates us from those we love. This is especially painful when death is accidental and premature.

Today's Gospel deals with something that can be even more painful than death: when one has given one's heart to another in love and in trust and the other person does not honour the commitment and breaks the trust. As well as the dangers of tragedy or death, we have to face the possibility and the pain of relationships failing or turning sour. Love is beautiful, but it is also delicate, and it can be fragile. The rending of a love relationship can leave us shattered in such a way that healing seems impossible.

Jesus is asked his opinion on the topic of divorce – a topic which underlines the

risks involved when we give ourselves and our hopes, our lives and our future into the trust of another. He places before us the purpose of marriage as he criticises his contemporaries for the ease with which men were able to divorce their wives. He challenges them to look beyond the limits of customary law and focus on God's design for marriage as a way of life in which men and women can grow, through unselfish commitment, to become humble and grace-filled adults, in a relationship in which together they can nurture children in love.

This is not to say that every marriage is made in heaven. Sometimes we human beings, even with the best will in the world, enter into destructive relationships that cannot bring either person to this mature loving. In such cases we need the courage and the humility to acknowledge our mistake and to go through the pain of separation. We will need as much understanding and love from the community as it can give.

Whatever path we walk in our journey of giving and receiving love, we are not meant to be alone. We need community, and it is here that the church has a key role, in supporting us as we strive to build love and in supporting us when our efforts collapse about us.

When we think of our parish community, we think especially of those who, for one reason or another, have ceased to experience communion with the praying community. They do not enjoy the help that comes through the Sacrament of Forgiveness, nor do they nourish themselves at the Eucharist. This kind of 'divorce' too can be painful, and one of our obligations as a family is to reach out to such people and always to be ready to welcome each other back in love.

Wherever we find ourselves in our relationships, let us remember the good news that God is love, and that all God's grace is now being offered us to find the truth that will set us free. Everyone in this church, whatever our past history, is capable now of loving and receiving love. We must not compare ourselves to others, or attempt to measure our love. Knowing that we are not meant to be alone, let us take whatever small steps of love present themselves to us and we will be astonished at the results. God is love and so love – any real love – is the stuff of which miracles are made.