

Twenty-ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time

In the concluding words of today's Gospel Jesus states that he was giving 'himself as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). The Greek word translated 'many' is *polloi*. These are the '*hoi polloi*', the ordinary folk, generally overlooked by those who exercise power and fancy themselves as important. Jesus wants to liberate us from everything that blocks our welcoming of grace, and this can include the power structures (church and state) that are unjust. Jesus calls his followers to opt out of such structures by living as 'slaves'. The word 'ransom' normally refers to liberating a person from the condition of a slave and making that person free. For Jesus, the only way to be free is to become a 'slave', giving one's life in the service of others. This is what Jesus did, even to dying the death of a slave.

We are trapped and lost, paralysed by fear, unable to see a way through and deaf to what God is saying to us. Jesus wants to liberate us by showing us what we mean to God and how we can respond to God's love. He wants us to 'live, and live to the full' (John 10:10). Jesus gives himself, in his way of living and in his way of dying, for anyone who chose to welcome the offer. As he says elsewhere in reference to his death on the cross and his resurrection: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself' (John 12:32).

It is sometimes said that we are saved by the cross of Jesus and a superficial reading of the New Testament could leave one with the impression that God, from all eternity, had a plan for our redemption, and that part of that plan was that Jesus should die on the cross. Such statements are capable of being grossly misunderstood, so I would like in this Mass to examine this matter with you more closely.

When we look at the cross what do we see? We see an awful and barbaric symbol of cruelty and oppression. We know that those who condemned Jesus to die in this way were acting unjustly. They were not acting in obedience to God. Far from it. They crucified Jesus precisely because they rejected God's word coming to them through him. Jesus says as much: 'You kill me because there is no place in you for my word' (John 8:37). It is not God who is responsible for the cross. It is the Jewish leadership, the fickle crowd, the Roman prefect and the 'obedient' soldiers. God sent his beloved Son to draw us to love God and to listen to him, not to be murdered by us (Luke 20:13-15).

God sent his Son to 'give his life', in the sense of making every moment a love-offering of himself to others. Jesus gave himself to the leper, and to the paralysed man; he gave himself to the sinners and prostitutes and outsiders; he gave himself to carrying out the mission of love given him by the Father. This self-giving brought him up against the resistance of those who refused to listen (Luke 6:11). When, sinfully and resisting the Holy Spirit, they tracked him down to effect their evil purpose, what was he to do?

His mission looked like a failure. The temple authorities were not listening; nor were the Pharisees. There was division even among his chosen disciples, who did not appear to be strong enough to carry on without him. Death must have seemed to Jesus to make no sense. He needed more time to do what he knew his Father wanted him to do. There had to be another way.

As sometimes happens to us, the sinful decisions of other people left him no room to manoeuvre. Heroically, he determined to continue carrying out his Father's will. He determined to continue giving his life. He determined to continue to preach the good news of God's saving love, knowing that the religious authorities did not want the truth to be spoken. He determined to remain prayerful and forgiving and patient, and to continue to take the side of the poor who were crying to God for help. On the night before he died he gave a meaning to his approaching death. His life was all that he had left, and he made his death, as he had made everything else, an offering of love.

When it is said that his death redeemed us, we mean, rather, that it was his dying. It was the way he died (see Mark 15:39). His death was another atrocious murder, performed in God's name by hypocritical people determined to protect their own interests. His death was brought about by others. The way he died, however, was determined by Jesus himself, and his manner of dying — in prayer, and faith and love and forgiveness and compassion — gave the final demonstration of the extent of his love (John 15:13). It was this love-giving, this self-giving, this life-giving that God willed. Thanks to Jesus' fidelity to his Father's will, not even the injustice and disobedience of those who crucified Jesus could thwart God's eternal design.

When we turn our attention from Jesus' relationship to his Father, and focus instead on his relationship to us, a second consideration emerges. What Jesus did stands as an example for us. He shows us how to listen to God, however terrible our circumstances may be. His resurrection holds out hope for us all, that God will vindicate us just as he vindicated his Son. Jesus shows us that when people behave badly towards us, we do not have to respond in the same way. 'Love one another', he said, 'just as I have loved you'(John 15:12).

However, his example would have had little power to persuade us, had he not suffered. Suffering is very much part of the human condition, and Jesus' words and example are all the more powerful in that we see him loving even when everything was against him. Jesus demonstrated his faith in God's love even when nothing supported such faith. He also showed us how to respond in love even in the worst situations. It is this that makes his message so convincing. It is this that draws us to follow him.

We needed something as shocking as a crucifixion to shake us out of our lethargy, and to save us from the futility of being caught up in a meaningless way of life as we reacted to sin with more sin, till we lost all hope of finding our way to the fullness of life and love for which we all yearn. We needed to see Jesus loving on the cross, not because God demanded a crucifixion, but because nothing less could convince us that in our suffering we, like Jesus, are surrounded by the unconditional and persistent love of God. Suffering, even unjustly inflicted suffering, does not have to stop our loving.

We needed to see Jesus believing and forgiving, even when faced with ultimate rejection and the apparent meaninglessness of doing so. For now, no matter what happens to us, we are able to 'look on the one whom they have pierced'(John 19:37), and learn from him the secret of a love that alone can free us from getting lost in a maze of sin. His example, and the Spirit of love that he gives us from the cross, make it possible for us, if we so choose, to give meaning to our own sufferings by making an act of faith in God, and allowing the Spirit of his love to transform our cross into a resurrection like his.

If, in our human way, we are to imagine God responding to the crucifixion, we should imagine God weeping, as Jesus wept over the city (Luke 19:41). This is God's reaction to all the terrible injustices that we humans inflict on each other by our sinful rejection of his loving inspiration. In making us free, God takes our freedom seriously, permitting our decision to say No to love, and so permitting the consequences of such a decision. But God does not stand by as a passive observer of our folly. God is actively inspiring everyone to bring love to flower where it is absent. If we refuse to listen, the way those who crucified Jesus refused to listen, we must not blame God for the effects of this refusal.

Through Jesus, it is revealed to all who are willing to look and listen, that God is love. Some rejected this love. Like the people in the desert who struck at the rock (symbol of God), so those who murdered Jesus struck at his heart with a lance. Just as Moses saw water flowing from the rock to slake the thirst even of those who were rejecting God (Numbers 20:11), so the beloved disciple saw water and blood flowing from the heart of Jesus on the cross (John 19:34).

There in that darkest place, in that most meaningless event, in that symbol of humanity's rejection of God, love shines forth. God did not will the unjust murder, but he did will the love-response; for it is God's love that is revealed in the heart of Jesus.

In the Gospel we are asked if we are willing to drink the cup that Jesus drank (Mark 10:38)? If we say Yes then we are saying that we want to follow Jesus in giving love even when we are being crucified, when we feel abandoned by God and unjustly treated by others. It is easy enough to pray today's responsorial psalm when things are going well: expressions like 'The Lord fills the earth with his love', and 'the Lord looks on those who hope in his love', and 'may your love be upon us, O lord, as we place our hope in you'. What we need to learn is to pray like that when we, like Jesus, are in darkness and are tempted to despair.

The crucifix above the altar says it all. The artist knows of the suffering experienced by Jesus. He has tried, however, as it seems to me, to go beyond the pain into the heart of Jesus. We see him stripped of everything and stretched out on the cross, but we see, too, his trust in God and his complete willingness to do God's will to the end. In his heart filled with trust and love the resurrection is already a reality, for God will never abandon us, but draws us into his embrace, even and especially when we are suffering. To know this and to act on this knowledge is to be ransomed from fear. Embraced by God's love and upheld by his Spirit nothing and no one can stop us living in love. And to live in love is to live in God and to enjoy already the beginnings of eternal life.