

18th Sunday of the Year, Year C

Today's liturgy opens in the **Entrance Antiphon** with a cry of the heart. We want to live life to the full but there are so many things inside us and outside us that hold us bound. We have come to realise that we are powerless to free ourselves. We are a bit like a seabird caught in an oil slick. So we cry out to God to liberate us: 'God, come to my help. Lord, quickly come to my aid. You are the one who helps me and sets me free. Lord, do not delay'

In the **Opening Prayer** we acknowledge that God is the source of our being and that God is accompanying us on the journey. Recognising the place that sin plays in our lack of freedom, we ask God to forgive our sins, to restore us to life and to keep us safe in his love.

I imagine that none of us would have trouble quickly identifying some of the elements of our life that stop us from experiencing the deep sense of well-being, personal integrity and freedom that we long for. We want to be creative and loving, and we would love to have the deep sense of peace and harmony that we have sometimes tasted.

- certain people upset us.
- we find ourselves in hurtful situations over which we have little or no control.
- we've made decisions that come back to haunt us but we can't undo what we have done.
- we've picked up ways of coping that make us pretty dysfunctional at times.
- we are addicted to the feeling of being in love, or to certain ways of escaping from our inner turmoil by drug dependency.
- we are so afraid of our inner life that we race around being busy to avoid the terror of loneliness.

We are all different, but I am sure that everyone here has some inkling of ways in which we would like to be free but know that we can't do it on our own. Today's readings are for us.

The **First Reading** and **Responsorial Psalm** focus on the brevity of life and the importance of not wasting it. The Psalm prays that God will fill us with his love because that is the only way forward for us. The **Gospel** focuses on greed, the compulsion to have more and more things in the foolish hope that possessions will bring us what we are looking for in life. The well-known expression 'eat, drink and be merry' is taken from this passage. In the **Second Reading** Paul also speaks of greed which he calls worshipping a false god, but before that he speaks of sexual sins. Simpler cultures than ours do not have the same opportunities for greed and generally have strict controls over sexual behaviour. In both these areas our society has lost its way, so if we really want to experience freedom we will need to resist prevailing attitudes and help each other steer a course through pretty dangerous waters. So let us follow the lead of the Readings and speak first of sexual disorders which keep us trapped and then add a few words on greed for possessions.

It is no accident that when Paul speaks of our need for freedom he turns first to sexual behaviour. Sexual behaviour is about who we are. It is about how we give and receive love. It is about how we respect our deepest longings and the deepest longings of others. Are we going to spend our life being driven by the pleasure we get out of the activation of our sexual desires? Our own experience and the experience of others teaches us that to be driven in this way is to end up hurting others and hurting ourselves. We say we don't want to hurt them and we certainly don't want to hurt ourselves, but that is exactly what we end up doing.

How can we discover the beautiful mystery of love by pretending to each other or by opening the sacred and mysterious depths of our being to people whom we have not taken the trouble to get to know and to whom we have not committed our soul? We are not free to enjoy love if we break the glass to get at the wine. We are sacred beings. We are also very precious and quite fragile in our beauty. Our tradition that goes back to Jesus and is expressed in today's reading is that we are to say with our bodies only what we have come to say with our spirit. When we experiment with others and with ourselves, driven by lust, we can do ourselves and others irreparable harm.

We have to keep reinforcing the beautiful virtue of modesty. We have to protect the banks of the river so that it will bring life as it flows towards the sea. Without these banks it will spill over and end in a quagmire of stagnant water, with no energy and no direction.

To live sexually fulfilling lives and to experience real love, we must be patient. We must learn to respect other people. Genital sexual expression is life-giving and liberating only in that wonderful situation where two people have learned to respect the inner mystery and sacredness of each other's being and where both have grown to a commitment whereby they long to give themselves to each other with a gift of self that they commit themselves never to take back. This mutual commitment is true when it is not only driven by desire but is also the fruit of a meeting of mind and heart and when it comes from our deepest being. We are talking about the pleasure and joy of loving, not the excitement of lust.

We call this mutual commitment a marriage commitment, and it is so important to a healthy community that of course it is a commitment which we do not want to hide. We want to tell the world and to celebrate it with family and friends. There are many pressures that can bring strain even to such a beautiful relationship and we need all the support of grace and of friends to help such a love relationship mature. Without such a commitment how can we expect to find that peace for which we long? How can we avoid a mutual using of each other to reinforce dependency or power or just distraction, rather than experience a union that gives direction to our deepest yearnings in a sacred place, graced by God and respected by our partner?

In his novel *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy describes a young boy: 'He was nine years old. He was a child. But he knew his own soul and treasured it, guarding it as the eyelid guards the eye'. Let us protect the beautiful souls of children, and let us combine our energy to provide for them a safe, loving environment where they can come to know and cherish their soul the way this young boy knew and cherished his. And let us protect our teenagers as they begin to experience sexual attraction. Teach them modesty. Teach them to respect their own mystery and the sacredness of sex. It is difficult to come to sexual maturity without making mistakes along the way, so we adults have to bring all our healing love to one another as we struggle to be free of the wounds

we have received and the wounds we have inflicted. In all of this let us open our hearts to the healing love of Jesus. He gives himself to us in this Eucharist to free us and to invite us into the intimacy of God's love. In the heart of God there is always a place for us. He loves us as we are, and he alone can liberate us from our compulsions, but only if we dare the journey to the heart. Paul insists on the importance of disciplining our sexual urges. He goes on to warn us of the destructive power of greed. If our relation to the world around us is dominated by our pathological need to possess rather than to give and receive, to enjoy and share, to live simply so as to focus on our deepest longings and those of others in love, we will, as all know, clutter up our lives and end up destroying ourselves and those we love. Our own experience tells us this and there is plenty of evidence around us to persuade us of the truth of what Jesus says in today's Gospel. In his exasperation he laments the folly of wasting our lives in this way.

So whether we think of our sexual compulsions or of the way we clutter our heart with possessions, let us take the cue from today's readings to check the direction our lives are taking and earnestly pray today's prayer, ready to listen to the prompting of God's Spirit guiding us to the way of peace: 'God, come to my help. Lord, quickly come to my aid. You are the one who helps me and sets me free. Lord, do not delay'