

Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year C

The prayer of today's Mass (sadly not included in the recent changes!) beautifully captures the longing of the Church for the world. It is described as a prayer for the courage to embrace the world in the name of Christ, and it reads:

'Father in heaven, the love of your Son led him to accept the suffering of the cross that we whose humanity he shared might glory in new life.
Change our selfishness into self-giving.
Help us to embrace the world you have given us,
that we may transform the darkness of its pain into the life and joy of Easter.'

'Help us to embrace the world'. This needs courage, for it is a lot easier to stand back and, from a safe distance, criticise the false values condoned or encouraged by others. Of course there is a place for criticism. Our personal experience, however, is that criticism is helpful only when it comes from love. This is because when someone does not love us we know that they do not understand us, and so we tend to defend ourselves against criticism which is felt as unjust.

It is the same in the public arena. When Christians criticise without love, those who are criticised will defend themselves against the criticism which they see as unenlightened. When this happens nothing good is achieved. Furthermore Christians who act in this way are not following Jesus whose command was to love one another. If we love we may well be in a position to criticise. If we do not love we had better be silent.

Jesus knew that his Father loves the world. It is this conviction that shines through the gospel of last Sunday's mass where we see the Father rushing out to the younger son who had thrown away his inheritance in extravagant living and who was returning home destitute. The father ran to him and kissed him, so delighted was he to have his son home again, safe and sound. It was this astonishing love that made it possible for the younger son to respond, to be reconciled with his father and to celebrate his home-coming. It is important to notice that the father went out to the elder son as well, greeting him with deep affection: 'My son, you are always with me and all I have is yours'. He wanted this boy, too, to come in and enjoy the feast. God is the father of all and he goes out to all in love.

Jesus knew that his Father loves the world. In obedience to the inspiration of God's loving Spirit, Jesus continued to embrace the world that he might transform into joy the darkness of its pain. He forgave his enemies, he welcomed the repentant thief into paradise, and from his pierced and broken heart, he poured out love to cleanse and comfort and give life to us.

He called his disciples to do the same when he commissioned them to go out to the ends of the earth to preach the same good news which he had preached: the good news that God is love and that he is constantly gracing everyone to turn from the destructiveness of sin, to believe that they are loved, and so to discover in their hearts the grace to respond in love, to God and to others.

I am reminded of something written at the beginning of last century by the founder of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, Father Jules Chevalier: 'From the heart of Jesus pierced on

Calvary, I see a new world coming forth: a great and life-giving world, inspired by love and mercy; a world which the Church must perpetuate on the whole earth'(Jules Chevalier, *The Sacred Heart*, 1900).

Jesus shared our humanity. If we wish to follow him and to carry out the desires of his heart, like him we will want to see the fire of God's love cast upon the earth. Like him we will believe in humanity. Our most precious quality as human beings is the certainty that we are loved by God and constantly upheld and inspired by his gracious and grace-giving Spirit. This is our contribution as Christians to our brothers and sisters who are working for a more human world. This is the good news that we must speak with our lips, and that is to inform all our words and actions and attitudes. May I remind you of the opening words of the declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the Church in the modern world (1965): 'The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts, for theirs is a community composed of men and women. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for everyone'(Gaudium et Spes §1).

In the same document, the Council went on to declare: 'The Church believes she can contribute greatly towards making the family of mankind and its history more human' (§40). 'We are witnesses of the birth of a new humanism, one in which man and woman are defined first of all by their responsibility towards each other and towards history' (§55). 'Christians cannot yearn for anything more ardently than to serve the people of the modern world ever more generously and effectively' (§93).

These words echo the sentiments of Pope John XXIII on his deathbed (24th May 1963): 'Today more than ever we are called to serve mankind as such, and not merely Catholics; to defend above all and everywhere the rights of the human person, and not those merely of the Catholic Church. Today's world, the needs made plain in the last fifty years, and a deeper understanding of doctrine, have brought us to a new situation. It is not that the Gospel has changed: it is that we have begun to understand it better. Those who have lived as long as I have were enabled to compare different cultures and traditions, and know that the moment has come to discern the signs of the times, to seize the opportunity and to look far ahead.'

Pope John also had the humility to acknowledge the disgraceful way many Christians have treated the people of Jesus' own nation: 'We realise now that many, many centuries of blindness have dimmed our eyes, so that we no longer see the beauty of Your Chosen People and no longer recognise in their face the features of our first born brother. We realise that our brows are branded with the mark of Cain. Centuries long has Abel lain in blood and tears, because we had forgotten your love. Forgive us the curse which we unjustly laid on the name of the Jews. Forgive us that, with our curse, we crucified You a second time'.

There are other examples of how we, while claiming to be Christians, and sometimes in the name of our faith, have ostracised certain groups, made people feel anything but welcome among us, refused marriage before the altar or burial in a Catholic cemetery. Some of these attitudes can be explained by earlier prevailing ignorance. But today's prayer reminds us to keep

looking at our attitudes and praying for the courage to love – the courage to embrace the world in its pain. The world needs a change of heart in many areas. Only an embrace such as that given by the father to his prodigal son will bring about this desired change.

The first reading and the psalm speak about the sudden rush of water that brings life to the dry river beds in the desert. The desert seems to be encroaching in many ways in the public and private life of our nation. We are invited to renew our trust that God is always offering grace, always doing something new. As we read in the third lamentation: 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; every morning they are renewed. Great is your faithfulness, O Lord'(3:22-23).

When Moses struck the rock (symbol of God) water gushed forth to quench the thirst of the people. When the soldier pierced the heart of Jesus on the cross, there came forth blood and water. Our sins and the terrible sins of the society of which we are part hurt us and hurt others and we must oppose the destructive influence that they exercise upon our children, our families, and the whole of our social fabric. But we can only oppose the sin if we love the sinner - in ourselves, in those who are close to us, and in our society and world.

The Pharisees in today's gospel were right to condemn adultery. They were wrong to condemn the adulterous woman. It was Jesus by his love and not they by their condemnation who changed the woman's life. Jesus did not condone her action. He calls it sin and tells her to 'go and sin no more'. He changed her because he loved her and refused to condemn her. No wonder Paul wanted to know him and to reproduce in his life the self-giving love that he found in the heart of Jesus.

While the Pharisees stand there accusing her, Jesus writes on the ground. Are we to see here an allusion to the words of Jeremiah: 'O hope of Israel! O Lord. All who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be recorded in the earth, for they have forsaken the fountain of living water, the LORD.

Next time we find ourselves criticising any person, could we ask ourselves two questions. Firstly do I know this person? Do I really know him or her? If I don't, then there may be a place for criticising what he or she is doing, but there is no place for criticising the person. And the second question is: If I know this person do I love him or her. If I do, then perhaps there is a place for criticism born of love. If not, then let silence guard my tongue lest I only harden the position I am aiming to correct and thus contribute to the harm which I seek to oppose.