

Sermon

Sunday 21st May, 2006

Lessons

Acts 10: 44 – 48

John 15: 9 – 17

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Grant us, O Lord, to ponder well what we hear out of Your Word; and by Your mercy may some holy and saving thought be borne in upon us; that it may come as new life to our souls in this hour of Your grace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jesus said, ‘This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’

John 15: 12-13

Centuries ago Formosa, now Taiwan, was governed by a Chinese Governor named Goho. He was a man of humane and liberal outlook. From the outset, one of the things which he sought to do was to persuade the tribes under his rule to abandon the established custom of offering each year a human sacrifice. He persuaded them to be content instead with an ox or a pig as their victim: for many years this continued. Then there was an unusually bad harvest. The tribal leaders came to Goho and said that the bad harvest was a punishment from the gods. They must have a human victim once more. The Governor pleaded with them, but in vain. Finally, he gave way. He told them to go to the old place of sacrifice tomorrow. There they would find their victim tied to a tree. The next morning the men of the tribe went to the place and found the man tied to the tree. He was wearing a red robe and a red cloth tied over his head. In a frenzy the men rushed up to the victim and with one blow struck off his head. As the cloth fell away, the tribesmen saw the face of the victim. It was Goho, the Governor himself. He was the last human sacrifice recorded among the tribes. By the sacrifice of his death, he did what his rule and teaching had failed to do. He changed their minds. Their dogmatic adherence to human sacrifice had

blinded them to the love their Governor had for them, to his wisdom and devotion. They did not see his great humanity until the moment they killed him. They did not see the value of every human person until they killed him. His sacrifice changed their hearts and minds. Jesus said, ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’

On the night he was handed over by one of his disciples to the authorities, on the very night the other eleven disciples fled and left him alone, Jesus said to his disciples, “You are not servants. I call you friends. And this is my commandment, ‘Love one another, as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.’” And Jesus said, ‘Dwell in this love.’ To abide or dwell in Jesus, in this love, means to make our home in him and to let Jesus make his home in us. Jean Vanier says:

In human relationships, the other person abides in us
virtually, intentionally, spiritually, not with a real presence.
In friendship with Jesus, he abides in us, in a *real presence*.

Being *at home* with someone we love means learning and following the desires of the one we love. It means pleasing him or her and sensing what he or she desires. It means being together, to have one heart, one mind, one spirit where there is no lasting discord or irreconcilable conflict or barrier that cannot be breached. It means learning to love the other as we love ourselves. Being at home with Jesus means to learn to love the way he loved. Being at home with Jesus means that we are so much in Him and He in us that we can say with Cardinal Newman:

Shine through me, Jesus,
and be so in me
that every soul I come in contact with
may feel your presence in my soul.

Let them look up and see no longer me
but only Jesus!

At its best, human love is a reflection of God's love. Many of us will have witnessed a mother's overwhelming grief for a child that has died before its time. We can marvel at a father's sorrowful but all-embracing love for a child who will never be like others. We can witness to parents' never-failing forgiveness for an adult child who has gone astray, or who has turned against them. This is human love at its best: repaying ingratitude with caring, a love that never fails and a love that lets go at enormous personal cost. The Church is a community which values and celebrates the place of love in human relationships. Human love is a doorway to understanding God's love for us. The Reformer, Martin Luther, commenting on the denial and indifference of people to God bluntly said, 'If I were God and the world had treated me as it has treated Him, I would kick the wretched thing to pieces!' By contrast, in the hour of his betrayal Jesus said, 'Love one another, as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. Dwell in this love.' James S Stewart said:

If parents will sacrifice themselves for their children, how much more God! If you will suffer for one whom you love, how much more God! Never forget that the human heart at its highest and best is a true signpost to the heart of the eternal.

And Henri Lacordaire preaching to a vast throng in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris said, 'If you would know, if you would know how the Almighty feels towards us, listen to the beating of your own heart, *and add to it infinity!*' Human love at its highest and best is a true signpost to the heart of the eternal.

One of Abraham Lincoln's enemies and greatest critics was a man named Stanton. Stanton hated Lincoln and used every ounce of his energy to degrade Lincoln in the

eyes of the public. He would even be rude about Lincoln's physical appearance. When Lincoln was elected President the day came for him to announce his new cabinet. For the all-important post of Secretary of War Lincoln chose Stanton. Advisor after advisor said to the President that he had made a mistake. Some asked him, 'Do you know this man Stanton?' Lincoln replied, 'Yes, I know Mr Stanton. I am aware of all the terrible things he has said about me. But after looking over the nation, I find he is the best man for the job.' Stanton served the nation and President well. H G Wells said that Lincoln is one of the six greatest men of history. When the President was assassinated Stanton stood by the coffin and referred to Lincoln as one of the greatest men that ever lived, saying that 'he now belongs to the ages.'

When Lincoln had been asked by a woman during the Civil War how he could keep finding kind words about the South he said, 'Madam, do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?' Is this not what it means when we dwell in the love of Jesus?

Understanding other people is, I believe, part of the great task we have been given by God as human beings. Understanding people to the point of being truly empathetic towards them is part of our human vocation. We will be compromised by our involvement in institutions, even Christian institutions but understanding others to the point that we can love them and respect them as we do ourselves is part of our human vocation. Henri Nouwen in his book, The Wounded Healer, wrote of the personal loneliness which resides in all of us. Love, friendship and fellowship go some way to alleviating that pain. Psychotherapy does what it can. Exuberant and highly emotional worship is sometime an attempt at dispelling the loneliness of being from which there is no escape in this life. Nouwen said that the Christian life should not

seek to take away that sense of loneliness, that ultimate sense that we stand alone in the universe. On the contrary, it is a gift to be cherished. It seems at times that we will do anything to rid ourselves of our basic human loneliness. We will seek satisfaction and quick relief from sources as varied as continually needing to be praised for our work, ecstatic worship services, craving unobtainable intimacy in relationships or regular drinking. But the painful awareness of our loneliness is an invitation to us to transcend ourselves and to imaginatively look beyond our own boundaries. An inner emptiness can be destructive but, properly understood, it is what leads us to other people and ultimately to God. Nouwen wrote:

We ignore what we already know with a deep-seated, intuitive knowledge – that no love or friendship, no intimate embrace or tender kiss, no community, commune or collective, no man or woman, will ever be able to satisfy our desire to be released from our lonely condition. This truth is so disconcerting and painful that we are more prone to play games with our fantasies than to face the truth of our existence. Thus we keep hoping that one day we will find the man who really understands our experiences, the woman who will bring peace to our restless life, the job where we can fulfil our potentials, the book which will explain everything, and the place where we can feel at home. Such false hope leads us to make exhausting demands and prepares us for bitterness and dangerous hostility when we start discovering that nobody, and nothing, can live up to our absolutistic expectations.

We are on a pilgrimage. We are sojourners in this world. Yesterday at the Opening of the General Assembly, the Lord High Commissioner, Lord MacKay, reminded us of the words of St Augustine: we are restless till we find our rest in God. On our pilgrimage Jesus invites us to learn to dwell in his love, the love that is prepared to die for the ones we love, the love that is prepared to die to self, the love that can reach out to understand other people with the same level of love and respect we accord ourselves. We can use God's gift to us, our inescapable personal loneliness, as a point of contact with all other human beings. It is a gift given to help us understand

imaginatively and feel for other people. Institutional churches are very far from perfect but the spiritual church of Jesus Christ is a wonderful and beautiful thing. Napoleon Bonaparte, looking back over his years of conquest, said, 'Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I have built great empires. But upon what did they depend? They depended upon force. But centuries ago Jesus started an empire that was built on love, and even to this day [people] will die for him.' Two thousand years ago Jesus had twelve disciples. There are now well over one billion Christians in the world. Christ's is an empire built on love. Dwell in my love: reach out beyond your own limitations to other people, use your own sense of brokenness to understand other people and feel for them. Understand that other people are as broken as you. Jesus said, 'My commandment is this: love one another, as I have loved you.'

Amen.