

## Homily For The Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)(30/01/22)

This second reading, from St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, is so familiar to us from weddings. It follows immediately from last week's reading, in which St Paul had explained to the followers of Christ in Corinth that the Christian community is made up of people who have different gifts, and different callings. Not everyone is called and gifted for teaching, any more than everyone is called and gifted for leading, or for prophecy. There is, he wants them to know, no hierarchy of gifts that mean some people are more important than others, they all have a part to play in animating the life of the Body of Christ.

But, he goes on to explain to them today, while not everyone is given gifts such as leadership, or teaching, the higher gifts, the more excellent way, are for everyone. Not everyone is to be a prophet, but everyone is to cultivate, learn, and grow in faith, as well as in hope, and supremely, in love. Some gifts mark out particular people for particular roles, but growth in these higher gifts is for everyone.

This was the passage that St Thérèse of Lisieux read at a time of some crisis for her. She was experiencing some inner turmoil because she knew she wanted to follow Christ, and she knew that she had chosen a hidden life of prayer, but she could not make out what her life with God would look like. She had dreamed of martyrdom, but in France that seemed unlikely. So what did God want from her? She read the passage we heard last week, and from that she understood what she was not called to be, but this still left her unsatisfied. What was to be the path that she should tread in following God? She read on, and reading the passage we have heard today it all became clear. She read that the Church is like a body, and so like any body she thought it must have a heart.

*"I knew that one love drove the members of the Church to action, that if this love were extinguished, the apostles would have proclaimed the Gospel no longer, the martyrs would have shed their blood no more. I saw and realized that [love sets off the bounds of all vocations, that] love is everything, that this same love [embraces every time and every place. In one word, that love] is everlasting.*

*Then, nearly ecstatic with the supreme joy in my soul, I proclaimed: O Jesus, my love, at last I have found my calling: my call is love. Certainly I have found my place in the Church, and you gave me that very place, my God. In the heart of the Church, my mother, I will be love"*

Not everyone was called to be an apostle or a martyr, but everyone was called to love – without it, why would the apostle put himself to the trouble, pain and trial of preaching? Why would the martyr accept death, if not for love? There are many different vocations and roles within the Church, but the motor that drives them all, that gives them power and drives them forward, is the same: it is love.

At the end of our days, standing before the Lord, he will not ask us 'were you an apostle, a bishop, a preacher, a healer, a leader' still less 'were you wealthy, successful, powerful, clever'. St John of the Cross reminds us *"In the evening of life we will be judged on love alone"*.

This is all very well, of course, and it sounds wonderful, but what does such a life look like, what does it feel like, how is it different from every other life?

As Christians we know that God is love, love is his fundamental nature. We also know that God is gift, his very nature is to be one who gives: he gives life; he gives hope; he gives blessings and challenges; he gives forgiveness; he gives himself. A Christian is someone who becomes used to living as a receiver of gifts. To come to Mass each week is to place at the centre of the First Day of the Week the receiving of gifts. God speaks to us, reaches out to us, enfolds us, gives himself to us and then sends us out to do the same.

We see in the life of Jesus the concrete reality of one who finds their freedom in gift of themselves. He sees the needs that people have: for guidance, healing, hope, affirmation, salvation, challenge, and he fulfils those needs, no matter the cost to himself, often tired and overextended. The Christian is someone who, without wanting to exhaust themselves entirely, nonetheless starts from the need they see around them, starts from seeing what needs to be done, and sets about making it happen. Because we, as Christians, have become used to receiving, week after week, the love of God, we learn to see the world around us as the Lord sees it. Reading the scriptures we see how he responds to people in need. The Gospels allow us to see other people as he sees them – first of all within the Gospel stories themselves, and then in our own lives. How does Jesus see this person in front of me now? This will help me to know what I should do.

To see another person as Jesus sees them, and above all to see the need within them, and the parts of their soul that crave love and acceptance. This is what we are in training for, this is the way of the disciple, this is the more excellent way.