

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Ezekiel 33:7-9 / Matthew 18:15-20)
07.09.2014

I suspect all of us have experienced the deep hurt that goes with being wronged. Our hearts feel acutely pained when the one who offends us is someone we love and care for. Things are often further complicated by the fact that it frequently happens that the person who has deeply wounded us never consciously set out to do so. Indeed they may never measure or even be aware of the pain they have caused us.

Quite often our deepest hurts are less about someone having intentionally done something against us, than they are around this person's neglect of us: their failure to have been there for us when we really needed them and longed for their presence by our side.

In this latter case, the pain we will feel is that of profound disappointment. There is a saddening connotation to the pain of disappointment.

Our deception will be all the greater when we have held, and still hold, in our hearts genuine esteem for the person who has let us down.

The emotions which arise within us in moments of deep suffering can damage our well-being. Our self-confidence may be greatly undermined. We can be left struggling with all sorts of doubts. We may even question whether we will ever be able to trust a human being again (be that another person or perhaps just ourselves).

I was particularly struck as we sang the Office here at the monastery last Wednesday evening by two of the psalms we used at Vespers that day: Psalms 54 & 55 (in the Greek numbering of the psalter). Psalms 55 & 56 (in the Hebrew numbering of your Bibles).

On Wednesday evening, I ignored what today's gospel passage would be.

I now see my prayer of Wednesday evening in relation to the gospel text proposed for this Sunday morning.

Our reading of psalms 54 & 55 (55/56) leads us to get under David's skin, as it were.

When we *get inside the man* what we perceive is that, as he struggled with his intimate companion's betrayal, his loved one's infidelity, or maybe it was just this person's thoughtlessness and absence, David found himself plunged into a very deep sadness.

We are given an insight into his sentiments of disappointment.

Clearly, David was left feeling lonely, totally bereft, overcome by anxiety and distress, utterly devastated.

We are aware of what David went through because he articulated what he experienced.

David articulated not only the thoughts going through his head, but also what was going on in his depths of his being as he voiced the sentiments of his pained and troubled heart.

If David put into the words of prayer what was going on deep down inside him and opened this up to God in a very honest way, he also dared to share those sentiments with others. When he composed these two psalms in written form he did so knowing that others would have access to their content.

I see this as an encouragement to us to do as David did in our hours of inner turmoil: to pray and to pray honestly, but also, even more than that, to share in an appropriate way, in some safe place, what is going on within us by engaging ourselves to live an unadorned self-revelation.

When we take the risk to do this (and it is a risk) what we show is that we have actually grasped that the way forward for us in our hours of suffering is to imitate Christ-Jesus in His *kenosis* (His total self-emptying). St Paul tells us Jesus submitted Himself to this way: He emptied Himself. The

Apostle tells us that we are called to follow the example Christ have us here.

What I am saying in all this is that it is clearly very important for us to articulate what we think and how we feel both in prayer and also before another person (other people) who can be trusted!

What a relief it is for us just to be able to own our pain and put our suffering and distress into words!

When we do this with a trusted other it proves to be a tremendous help to us.

Of course, sometimes a trusted other is simply not available to us. In this case, we must put in place what we can to help us through.

Some of us may find that totally honest journalling is a good help. The written word leads us to externalise what is going on deep down within us. It is a means that even the most isolated and lonely person can use to communicate their true feelings. It is particularly useful when the person suffering is afraid that anything they might express verbally before another could be misused later on and turned against them.

In our prayer we should not be afraid to lament, complain and cry out our distress.

We should feel free enough in our prayer to express our anxiety, grief, sense of loss, whatever it is that is churning away inside us.

It is in this way that we find our pain's hold upon us loosened and eventually we begin to find release from it.

The psalms and many other Scripture texts show us how people could be honest to God and cry out whatever they felt on the spur of the moment. These passages of the Bible encourage us to dare to do the same.

The kind of honest prayer I am proposing here helps us connect with and accept, but not get stuck in, our own sad and sorry state. It eases the burden when what we are carrying is just too much to bear alone.

The cries of appeal we lance in our prayer help lift us out of the paralysis that can overcome us in our state of emotional meltdown.

The Psalms which spoke to me last Wednesday evening are but two examples of the kind of honest prayer we find formulated in so many places in the Bible.

One could also think of, refer to, dare to espouse and make one's own those ardent, heart-rending, pleas of Jesus recorded for us in the Passion narratives. Jesus' prayer of distress in the agony He went through in the Garden of Gethsemane and His last words upon the cross (some of which were poignant cries of desolation) are words we can take and make our own when we are led to share in Christ's Passion.

I find it helpful and encouraging for us to see how in times of trouble and deep pain, at those moments when they were clearly wronged, God's servants (including the servant *par excellence*, Jesus) also dared to pray a prayer of trust. They could pray a prayer that was trusting enough to express the challenge trust was proving to be in their moments of pain and disappointment.

In a well-known psalm David speaks of trusting in God even when he felt no one and nothing else could be trusted. (Psalm 115/116).

We can take it that David's self-confidence had taken a battering in all he had gone through and yet here and elsewhere, in another psalm (Psalm 41/42, he dared to say: *hope and trust in God still* The psalmist declares that instead of envying the wicked or resenting those who do us wrong we should *trust in the Lord instead*. (Psalm 36/37).

Yet another Psalm (50/51) shows David trusting in God to restore again his life after the self-disappointment he felt in the aftermath of his sin of cheating infidelity.

Whether we have been wronged by another or whether another has wronged us, the call addressed to us is the same. It is a call to trust and to open our hearts to the Lord, relying on God's mercy. St Benedict's counsel comes to mind: *Never ever lose hope in God's mercy.* (RB chapter 4.)

During the hours of loneliness which accompany every estrangement from or absence of one upon whom we have counted, it is especially important for us to grasp that the Lord is always with us. God has been there. God is there. God always will be there. *The Lord is ever by our side.* The Lord is there when we traverse our darkest nights. He guides us safely through the valleys of shadow. God is not only by our side, He is within us!

Others may well disappoint us and we may further disappoint ourselves (if only by our wounded reactions in face of the hurt and deception we feel in regard to people we would only ever want to esteem). But, God will never disappoint us. The Lord will never fail us. He will never let us down.

Indeed, it is when our struggle is at its most arduous that God is most there for us. We may not feel His presence beside us at those times, for the simple reason that He is right within us!

Christ is always more with us and within us than we are with and within ourselves!

It is vital for us to remember when things are difficult, and the going is particularly tough, that the Lord is not only holding us upon His heart, but He is carrying us within His heart!

In the hours of deep distress we experience, at those times of profound sadness we traverse, when our hearts are greatly troubled and it feels as if our entrails have been pierced through, when it feels as if we have been cut open and there is only a gaping wound where our heart once was, when our emotions are as sensitive as raw flesh, the temptation may well be to go into hiding. We must avoid this foolish response. We must resist isolating ourselves and becoming lost in our loneliness. The way forward, the way through, is to reach out to God and to others. We must also allow God and others not only to reach out to us, but to reach into us.

The call addressed to us, and it is a real challenge for us to respond to at times, is always a call turn to the Lord in humility and childlike trust. It is a call to place our confidence in Him anew. It is a call to allow Him to seek us out and hold us close to His loving, understanding, compassionate heart. The compassion of the tender heart of our God wants to visit and console us: with every dawn it comes to us from on high, but the Lord will never force entry. We must open the door of our hearts to welcome Christ in.

It is striking in today's gospel passage to hear Jesus invite us to make every effort to come out of isolation and loneliness. Jesus goes as far as to encourage us (indeed command us) to reach out to the one from whom we have become estranged: the person who has hurt and offended us. He insists upon the need for us to do whatever we can to reconnect with the one with whom the relationship has become strained, broken down and even been severed.

Indeed, Jesus insists so strongly on the need to resolve issues and seek reconciliation that when it is impossible for two individuals to do so by themselves alone, then the help of the community must

be drafted in to offer its support.

St Benedict develops this though in his Rule for Monks.

When it is impossible for the abbot to reconcile a wayward brother who has excommunicated himself, Benedict says that *the abbot must then solicit the help of the prayers of all the brethren for the healing of wounded brother and the mending of the broken relationships in the community his wounds have caused.*

No doubt, Benedict was inspired by the final lines of today's gospel passage when he suggests this: *Where two or three of you agree in prayer on anything, the Lord will grant it.*

I began this morning's reflection by saying that I am sure that we will all have experienced the pain of being wronged or hurt by another in the course of our lifetime.

I am equally convinced that many of us will also be aware that we have offended others along the way. We will have hurt others without setting out to do so, without in any way desiring to cause offence.

Whatever our situation (whether we are the one offended by another or the cause of another's aggrieved sentiments) today's gospel passage contains a strong message of hope for us.

Release is promised to all of us here.

We are called to loosen our offender's bonds and we are promised that our own binding chains will also be unbound.

When we unbind another what we discover is that we ourselves are set free.

Pardon liberates!

Pardon offered frees the offender and the one offended.

It is to the extent that we allow others' *off the hook* and let them go free, that we experience an increasing inner liberty in our own lives.

Our wounded hearts are released from and relieved of the burden of self-destructive recrimination and constant rumination over the ills afflicted upon us.

What is asked of us when it comes to forgiveness is nothing less than to offer those who have offended us total amnesty.

This is what Christ did for us on Calvary. He forgave our sins and He did so unconditionally. He set no limits to the pardon He offered. *He forgave all our guilt. He took our sin away.*

Forgiveness (at least the desire to forgive) will always be the hallmark of the true Christian disciple.

The call addressed to us by Jesus is a call to cancel our offender's debt.

Writing to the Romans, St Paul reminds us that *the only debt we should owe one another is that of mutual love. (Romans 13:8).*

This love is owed to the debtor by the one to whom they are indebted, as much as it is owed by the one who is in debt.

To say that the lender is as much indebted to the debtor, as the debtor is to the lender, shows us how strong the bond of mutual love is for the Christian.

Indeed, it shows us that the Christian is called to move beyond the notion of lending and of being in debt altogether.

In the communion of Christian love we are called to *freely give and freely receive.*

When the love two people share is authentic, pure, gratuitous love, this love leads each one to set

the other free.

It creates a space of liberty between the two which always leaves room for a fresh start in love, a fresh start in life.

After the pain and hurt of misunderstandings and even grievous wrongs committed, new life and an even deeper love between them can emerge.

The Easter *Exsultet* reminds us that *God's work of redemption is more wondrous still than that of creation.*

A relationship restored can be more beautiful still than one which never fell into disrepair.

Love renewed is richer still and even more beautiful than love that was never impoverished or tarnished in any way.

Among the most beautiful things to be witnessed in this world is wounded love healed: life in harmony and peace restored.

While we all desire this at a personal level in our lives, we should also surely long for it at the level of our land, wounded and marred as Northern Ireland is by mutual hurt and recriminations.

And clearly we must also hope for it for the whole of this divided world in which we live: a world living under an increasing threat of violence.

Amen!