

6th Sunday of Easter (B)
(Acts 10:25-26.34-35.44-48 / John 15:9-17)
10.05.2015

If we were to sum up all Jesus' teaching in one word, what word would we use?
Would it not be **love**?

Love is the great commandment Christ gave us.
Love is what we see displayed by His whole way of life.
The four Gospels depict Jesus' life as having been totally energised by love.

In the passage from John's Gospel read today (an extract from Jesus' Farewell Discourse) the Lord speaks very openly of His love for His disciples and calls upon them to live in His love. He reveals in this passage that love gives sense to His saving passion, death and resurrection. We could say that Christ's saving acts give flesh to His words addressed to us this morning: *There is no greater love than to give one's life.*

Our reading of the post-resurrection gospel scenes shows them to be all imbued with love. Just think of Jesus' encounter with Mary of Magdala. The love in the air is quasi-tangible. Or again, think of Christ's meeting with Simon Peter on the shores of the lake. Here too the focus is on love. Love is at the heart of the exchange between the Risen Lord and the disciple who had failed Him in His hour of need. The Risen Jesus' love restores Peter's broken relationship with Him; Christ's love heals Peter's infidelity and permits the apostle to recommit himself to the Lord, in whose regard he has been unfaithful.

The resurrection of Jesus which we celebrate throughout these fifty days of Easter is essentially a mystery of love. It is the revelation of God's life-giving, life-restoring love, not only for Jesus, whom God raised from the dead, but also for all of us who are restored to life in Christ. Day after day during this Easter season, it is as if the Risen Lord comes to visit us to whisper this consoling message into the secret of our hearts: *I love you.* There is a re-creative energy in those words.

In the passage from John's gospel we hear this morning, one commandment is given to us. We call this commandment the Great Commandment. It is the commandment to love: *Love one another as I have loved you.* Jesus goes on to say: *There is no greater love than to give one's life for those one loves.*

It is easy to talk about love, but much more challenging to live love in the way Jesus calls us to: in a self-giving way.

We can sometimes imagine that we are living love when all we are doing, in fact, is finding pleasure for ourselves in our relationships with others. This can happen even when it comes to our relationship with *the great Other*, who is God.

We can be under the illusion that we are in love with someone when all we are doing is taking love from that person for ourselves. This may produce within us the *feel good factor* associated with love, but if our interest is just what *we* feel (that we feel good), then there is something amiss and incomplete and it is not true or mature love we are experiencing.

In true love, mature love, the focus is not on oneself alone, but also, and above all else, on the other.

A true lover's concern is not solely about taking from, or even in receiving from, the loved one, but also, and above all else, the true lover's concern is to give of him or her self to and for the one loved.

The Sacred Scriptures make the point that true love, mature love, demands perseverance.

Love cannot be just a *flash in the pan* affair. It is more than just a passing sentiment, tugging on our heart strings.

Anyone can become excited for a moment and feel shivers run down their spine. Such sentiments do not of themselves constitute love. They may denote some sort of attraction to the other, but love must go deeper than skin deep attraction.

Paul reminds us: *Love endures. Love never passes away.*

Love also demands of us consideration of the other's needs.

It demands of us a commitment to care for others when they need us and not just when we need them. The word of God is clear: *Look out for one another's interests and not just for your own.*

Jesus' teaching makes this point over and over again and so too do the apostles Paul and John in their New Testament Letters.

Writing to the Corinthians Paul states simply: *Love is never self-centred. Love does not seek to possess what the other has. It is not jealous. It does not seek to captivate the other for oneself. It is not grasping.*

Puppy love, infatuation, immature love are all these things, but true love, mature love, always seeks to be unselfish.

True love, mature love, sees the loved one's needs always and seeks to serve the loved one first.

It is never just self-serving.

It does not content itself with the idea of being *in love with love*.

While there are those who *love love*, which really only amounts to loving themselves, we are called to love people, another person, other persons to the point of being ready to give our lives for them.

True love draws us out of ourselves, beyond ourselves; it leads us to make an offering of our lives.

The litmus test that we have found true love and have acceded to mature love, will be how we manage when we come up against difficulties in our relationships, how we cope when we encounter unlovable aspects of people we are in relationship with.

Our love will be shown to be mature if and when we still love those whose character defects we have discovered.

It will be verified if we love those whose character defects are apparent, not just despite their flaws, but even with them.

We truly love another when we love that person with their unlovable character defects still part of their make-up as a person.

We read how *God loved us while we still sinners*.

Christ gave His life for us, knowing us to be far from perfect. He sacrificed Himself for us with our character defects and our flaws.

God loves us with our faults and failings, our imperfections and our sin.

We are called to love others as God loves us.

This explains Jesus' insistence that true love demands of us a certain sacrifice; it requires of us that we give our lives for those we love.

Christ has shown us the way: *There is no greater love than to give one's life.*

St Ignatius tells us that *love does not reside in words or sentiments alone.* It expresses itself concretely; *it is displayed by deeds.*

Love is not only about speaking tender words and exchanging warm embraces.

Even though tender words and displays of affection are legitimate expressions of love, love cannot and should not be reduced to these external signs.

If true love, mature love, is self-giving, the '*self-giveness*' it calls us to is gratuitous '*self-giveness*' made manifest in charitable action.

Gratuity in relationships leads us beyond a mentality which asks: *what is in this for me?*

It also leads us beyond a dependency upon the other's response to us.

We can love those who do not love us. Indeed, Jesus tells us that we should arrive at this point, for He calls upon us to love our enemies!

True love, mature love, is irreversible.

Since *love endures forever*, no matter what is done to wound or reject it, it is not withheld or withdrawn.

The other day I had occasion to chat with a man in the airport. We were both taking a flight from Bristol to Dublin. He was around sixty years of age and heading off with twenty-eight other guys for a *Stag Party* in Dublin. His friend who was in his late fifties was getting married for the first time. Among those on the *Stag* trip there was a man who was on his fourth marriage and the chap chatting with me explained to me that this marriage too was becoming a bit wobbly. His friend analysed the situation of the fellow in question this way: *The poor guy's problem is that he has never really known love of another person.* (He said this not in any condescending way, but with a genuine concern and care for his friend.) The man who had started chatting to me then opened up quite a bit about himself as we sat on in the *Departures Area*. (I was dressed in a clerical collar and I suspect this led him to share a lot of stuff he probably wouldn't have shared otherwise.) He explained that he was not a practising Christian. Then he looked at me squarely and said: *But I have known love and because it was love, it is love. Yes, it remains love and it will endure forever. I gave myself to my wife and for her and I will not be taking any of that back. I cannot say I 'loved' her in the past tense. Love is for life. I love her still and I believe I always will.*

He concluded by saying that this was just how it is for him, even though his wife had up and left him some years previously.

Jesus speaks in today's gospel in terms we can find hard to grasp and around which we have to be vigilant.

He speaks in terms of sacrifice, sacrificial love: giving up one's life for one's loved one.

While we must take what Jesus says seriously, we must be careful not to comprehend what He says in an unhealthy way.

Jesus is not suggesting self-harm or self-annihilation.

Maybe it would help us to get things properly if we were to frame them in another way.

I remember once hearing a French Jesuit say: *Healthy self-sacrifice is actually true self-promotion.*

On reflection, I cannot but agree.

Let me explain.

It seems to me that what this teacher was flagging up is that true love accomplishes, completes and fulfils us.

Paul's words come to mind: *There is more joy in giving than in receiving.*

These words the apostle attributes to Christ Himself. Paul writes: *As Christ himself has said, there is more joy in giving than in receiving.*

Over and beyond the joy of loving and also being loved there is a promise of life.

St John tells us: *All those who love are begotten of God.*

Again the point is made that love is life-giving. It engenders new life.

Someone who truly loves is begotten by God and feels totally alive.

Love makes us become more fully who and what we are, for it makes us become like God.

St John tells us: *God is love.*

It follows that those who love resemble God.

Love then is more than just a commandment. It is, at least it should be, our whole life's programme.

Jesus makes the point for us this morning that there is joy in loving.

This joy is clearly not narcissistic self-satisfaction.

Unhealthy narcissistic self-satisfaction is not the result of loving another; it is the result of self-love alone.

Admittedly, the first joy of love is knowing oneself to be loved.

The apostle reminds us: *God first loved us*, so we are always preceded in love and by love.

In the journey of life all begins with the assurance that God loves us.

Others too come quickly into play: our parents, those whose loving kindness nurtured our lives.

We will never be able to love another if we do not waken to the fact that we have been and are loved.

It is the love of God given to us from the very outset of our existence, whatever unfortunate experiences may have intervened in the unfolding of our life-story, a love which is renewed for us each and every moment, that makes it possible for us to love in our turn.

Called by the gospel to give our lives out of love, we must first receive love.

It is only when our hearts are alive with love that we can and will spontaneously exude love to others in a totally unselfish way, in a spirit of self-giving that expects nothing in return.

The good pope John XXIII, a saint who exuded love by his whole way of being, said many years ago: *Whoever has a heart full of love, always has something to share.*

I would say: Whoever has a heart full of love, always gives him or her self.