

Pentecost Vigil

(Exodus 19:3-8.16-20 / Ezekiel 37:1-14 / Romans 8:22-27 / John 7:37-39)

23.05.2015

In the lines we read from John's gospel this evening Jesus is clear.

He invites us to come to Him, assuring us that we shall receive the Spirit and that this gift will satisfy our thirst.

'If any man is thirsty, let him come to me!

Let the man come to me and drink who believes in me!

(...) From His breast shall flow fountains of living water'.

He was speaking of the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive.

I would like to hone in on one word from that verse this evening: the word *receive*.

This is a word which the Scriptures associate with the gift of the Spirit not only here in John 7, but in many other texts (I think of Jesus' appearance to the disciples in the Upper room, later on in John's gospel, or again various passages in the Acts of the Apostles).

Receptivity is asked of us in regard to the gift of the Spirit.

I cannot emphasise enough the importance of receiving what the Lord offers to us.

What Christ offers us is love, and, of course, love never imposes itself. Love is always a gift which is proposed to us. It is, therefore, something we have to receive.

The Lord will never impose Himself upon any of us without our consent. This is because *God is love*. Any true lover will always respect their loved one too much to impose him or her self upon the other.

And so it is that Jesus says to the disciples in the Upper Room: *Receive the Holy Spirit*.

The passage from John 20 to which I refer there shows us that reception of the Spirit is closely associated with the forgiveness of sin.

Jesus says to the apostles: *Receive the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins*.

With forgiveness comes liberation and healing.

If our own sin deprives us of our liberty and binds us. so too our 'un-forgiveness' of others damages and wounds our hearts.

Ultimately, we need to be healed of our slavery to sin and our tendency to hold back from offering forgiveness.

It is not because the Spirit is offered to us that we receive this grace, of course.

The gift of the Spirit must be accepted and welcomed by each one of us. A personal consent to God's grace at work in our lives is always required.

Otherwise, our personal freedom is not respected, and, where personal freedom is not respected, there is a deficit in regard to love.

Already in the gospels we see how, during Christ's earthly life, there were some (indeed many) who refused and rejected Him and the gospel message of forgiveness He came to proclaim.

Quite a number of people found it hard to reconcile Jesus' words of peace and pardon with their own clung-to anger and desire for revenge.

Many found it hard to accept the core gospel concepts of grace and mercy. They struggled with and

rejected Jesus' revelation of God's graciousness; they refused His displays of God's unconditional love.

There were those who cried out that what Jesus proclaimed stood in contradiction with the requirements of justice laid down in God's Law..

People's difficulty (especially religious people's difficulty) with the basic Christian revelation of *the loving kindness of the tender heart of our God* still lives on.

There are people today (many who would claim to be religious people) who still object when mercy is spoken of as the very heart of the Christian message.

Some religious people find it hard to be open to anyone or anything that challenges their understanding of things or could shatter their time honoured traditions.

The self-righteous, the self-satisfied, those who see themselves as righteous, and who see others as lacking in uprightness of heart (according to their standards!), will always struggle with Jesus' liberality and His proclamation of unconditional forgiveness.

They will frequently echo those words used against Jesus at His trial and judgement: *We have a law and according to our law.*

They will so easily forget that Scriptural insight which states that ultimately *God's law is love.*

One has only to read some of the reactions to Pope Francis' whole teaching around the merciful love and tender heartedness of our God (even among those called to be apostles in the Church today) to see how many still struggle with the gospel's vision of the wide, open, welcoming, all-embracing love of God which excludes no one.

Apostles most definitely, but not only apostles, all Christians, are called to be witnesses to the resurrection.

What is revealed by Christ's resurrection is the Lord's power to restore, renew, heal, pardon and give a fresh start in life.

Since this is what the resurrection reveals, why or how could any of us dare to say that the Church cannot offer people whose lives are marred in one way or another a fresh start in life?

Tonight's gospel passage which shows us Jesus in the temple calling all who thirst to come to Him, awakens within our hearts the memory of another very beautiful gospel scene which speaks of thirst being quenched: I think of chapter 4 of John's gospel, which recounts the story of the woman who encountered Jesus at the well of Sychar.

Both texts have us look forward to the living stream of God's grace which will flow from the open side of Christ upon the cross, where John's gospel actually has Jesus make the gift of His spirit.

I would like to conclude this reflection upon God's merciful love, confirmed by *the gift of the Spirit for the forgiveness of sins*, by sharing with you the very beautiful insights of the Anglican priest and poet, Clive Sansom.

I invite you to receive, welcome and take to heart, the words of Clive Sansom which I will read for you, for I believe these words to be God-inspired words. I see them as given to us by the Lord tonight to encourage each one of us.

A bit like the woman of Samaria who went to the well to fetch water, we have come here to this

church and to this Night Office to quench our thirst.

I dare to believe that some of us may actually have been led here tonight so that we can be *surprised by grace* in our meeting with the Lord.

It is always the Lord's way to approach us humbly and with a delicate discretion.

As I said earlier, Christ never imposes anything upon us, not even His gracious loving kindness.

It is also often the case that the Lord comes taking the guise of a mendicant.

So that He may satisfy us, Jesus actually asks us to give Him to drink.

He did this at Samaria and He also did it upon the cross when He petitioned: *Give me to drink.*

If we are not quite sure of where we stand in regard to thirst for God, Jesus is clear where He stands in our regard. He says to each one of us: *I thirst! I thirst for you!*

Christ thirsts for our love.

I leave Sansom to speak with his poetic insight from his work *The Woman of Samaria*:

*He came to me with his eyes and asked for water.
Stretched out his hands and spoke.
His mind burned into mine like the noon sun,
My pitcher of thoughts broke.*

*I had not noticed him at rest by the well-head,
Shadowed by the rare tree;
But as I carried my shame into its coolness
His eyes awaited me.*

*I tried to avoid them as I drew the well-rope
Taut through a mindless hand.
I saw his robe cross the speckled sunlight,
His feet stir the hot sand.*

*I saw his face. It was white with road-dust,
Whiter than any stone.
But his eyes were ageless and deep as well-shafts
As they met my own.*

*They unroofed my brain with their profound gazing,
Made the heart a molten thing:
Every purdahed thought unveiled itself
Under their questioning.*

*He spoke of water to cleanse the spirit:
I tried not to understand.
he followed me along the road of my evasions,
And when it ceased in sand*

*He brought me home from my self-forced journey -
He showed me my own soul
Cracked and dry as a discarded wine-skin,
And made it whole.*

*He came to me with his eyes and asked for water,
Stretched out his hands and spoke.
as I carried my peace back to the streets of Sychar,
A new world woke.*

Whether we recognise our thirst or not, like the psalmist, we all pine after and yearn for God.

Tonight Christ says to us: *Come to me all you who are thirsty.*

He says to each one of us: *Let me quench your thirst. Let me satisfy you.*

May we be gracious enough to receive from the Lord the gift He offers to us: His Spirit, the abundance of His love, which He gives us to drink to our fullest delight.

Amen!