

Pentecost Vigil (A)  
(John 7:37-39)  
30.05.2020

*If anyone is thirsty, let that one come to me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scriptures said, 'From their innermost being shall flow streams of living water'.*

In the invitation we hear Jesus address to His listeners in the course of this Pentecost Vigil He touches upon something we all carry deep within us: a thirst which longs to being quenched. We all carry in our hearts desires which we hope to see fulfilled. Jesus invites us to recognise these movements of our souls and to understand that ultimately it is only in Him that they will ever be fully satisfied.

Even if people don't realise it, their deepest yearning is a yearning for God. This is our belief as Christians. I see this hinted at in what we heard proclaimed at the opening of the great Easter Vigil, when the Lord was hailed to be *the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of all that is*. That amounted to saying that everything tends towards Christ whom we confess as *our Lord and our God*. The American psychiatrist and theologian Gerald C. May, speaking of his experience in the practice of psychiatry, made this remark: *After twenty years of listening to the yearnings of people's hearts [as a psychiatrist], I am convinced that human beings have an inborn desire for God*. He went on to declare: *Whether we are consciously religious or not, this desire is our deepest longing and most precious treasure*. The last line of May's observation leads me to suggest that the dissatisfactions we carry in our hearts are perhaps not so much a frustrating inconvenience or a terrible ill as they are a sign of good health. For this reason our dissatisfactions should actually comfort us. Our unfulfilled aspirations (even those we feel painfully) are not so much afflictions as they are blessings.

The psalmist is someone who captures the emotions of the human heart very well. He helps us articulate what we sometimes feel in the depths of our being when he speaks in terms of the soul's unquenchable thirst for God. *Like the deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is thirsting for you my God*. Or again: *My body pines for you, O Lord, like a dry weary land without water*. For the psalmist to state in yet another psalm: *It is He, the Lord, who satisfies the thirsty soul*.

I was nearly going to say at this point that, if we were to look at the world around us, we would see that so many people are driven by their desires; and that their unsatisfied longings constitute a particularly strong impulse within them. Let me immediately correct my initial thought by saying that we don't have to look around us; we don't have to look beyond or go outside of ourselves to see this to be the case. If only we dare to honestly examine the depths of our own hearts and admit to what motivates us much of the time, then I am pretty sure that we would be led to recognise just how much we ourselves are driven by our desires. Furthermore, I think we would have to recognise that on occasion we can be led to go astray, seeking fulfilment in many places where it would be better not to go. Some of the directions in which we head in our futile bids to satisfy our longings will not be good for us; they won't be wholesome, nor will they be healthy... that being so, they won't be holy either.

Because our efforts have been vain attempts to attain happiness we will soon know how empty they are. Usually, even though we may have felt good within ourselves for a brief moment, very quickly sentiments of dissatisfaction will surface and feelings of disappointment come to the fore again. This goes to show us that what we took to be fulfilment was simply a fleeting pleasure. It did not provide contentment of lasting value.

The psalmist spoke of *living water, flowing streams, an active water-brook*. Other prophetic texts in the Bible use these and/or similar images as well. We also hear Jesus speak in this vein in the passage from John's Gospel heard tonight. Christ evoked the idea of *a fountain of living water, continually springing up* in the heart of the believer. He invited His listeners (and He invites us who read this text) to turn to Him so that we may find the source of life in Him. Saying that, I am led to think of yet another New Testament testimony which refers to running waters. I think of the great *flowing torrent of the river of life* mentioned in John's Apocalypse. We are told that its current will never fail; it will never dry up. I am also led to think of what the prophet Jeremiah had to say in contrast to this image of living, flowing water when he put his readers on their guard against a temptation to which we can all so easily succumb – even imagining that our efforts in this respect are praise-worthy and good. In Jeremiah 2:13 we read: *My people have committed two sins, two errors: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water*. One contemporary English translation reads: *You my people have sinned in two ways. You have rejected me, the source of life-giving water and you have tried to collect water in cracked, leaking pits dug in the ground*. Later on in Jeremiah we read of how the nobles would send their servants to fetch water in these cisterns, but to no avail. We read in Jeremiah 14:3: *The nobles send their servants for water; they go to the cisterns, but find no water; their jars return empty. They are shamed and humiliated, they cover their heads*. For Jeremiah to explain why this is so further on in his text. We read in Jeremiah 17:3: *This is because they have abandoned the Lord, the fountain of living water*. What is the prophet Jeremiah implying here? What do those words have to say to us? It seems to me that what Jeremiah is drawing to our attention is that we forsake God, the fountain of living water, when we set off *full of ourselves*, but empty within, with for goal in life, just to do our own thing; to satisfy our desires selfishly. We forsake God when we construct an autonomous life-strategy, without reference to the Lord. This is the equivalent of making our own cisterns and filling them with water that we consider will satisfy us. The real problem is our construction work: the cisterns we build for ourselves. What we build alone, without God's direction, His instruction, will break and leak. Our self-designed cisterns (our autonomous plans) simply won't hold water. As a result, we will find ourselves continually thirsty.

What I understand Jeremiah to be saying to his listeners (and tonight that is to us) is that people who are self-centred, self-obsessed, are people who are destined to be permanently dissatisfied, since the human heart's deepest desires cannot be fulfilled in itself alone. *Our hearts are not at rest, O Lord, until they find their rest in You*. (St Augustine.)

Our most profound human desire is the desire for communion: communion with God and communion with others. The very fact that we were created male or female makes of each one of us a being who is not complete in ourself! There is a fundamental lesson for us in this fact. It is that none of us can stand apart and/or go it alone; we all need to be connected with others in some way. The experience of communion/community is vital for our well-being. None of us is made to be auto-sufficient. We were all meant to be one with God and one with others – including those of us for whom solitude is a constitutive part of our vocation... as is the case for us monks. We are called to live our monastic solitude in communion, in community.

Jesus' words addressed to us at the heart of this night's celebration are an encouragement to us; they are an invitation. The Lord bids us to come to Him... and to allow Him to come to us. The words Jesus speaks to us tonight invite us to permit Him to release His own life-energy within us. Christ's life-energy is the Holy Spirit, who is the very breath of God.

The Lord wants to give His Spirit to us. He wants to see us living fully. That means allowing the Lord to move freely within us, allowing Him to be fully alive in our hearts.

What is offered to us tonight is the free gift: the gift of *God's love poured into our hearts*, as St Paul reminded the Romans.

Taking up the invitation of Jesus to come to Him, John was given to relay to us what he heard in the revelations made to him on the Island of Patmos and recorded for us in the Book of the Apocalypse. *The Spirit and the bride say come! Let the one who is thirsty come! Let the one who hears say, come! Whoever is thirsty, let that one come, and whoever wishes, let that one come and avail of the free gift of water of life which I bestow. (Apocalypse 22.)*

From the earliest texts in the Old Testament, right throughout the psalms, in the time of Jesus and beyond then in the New Testament, the People of God are depicted as a people filled with and animated by a desire for God. The Church's mission is to keep a healthy desire for God alive in people's hearts. It is to encourage people to acknowledge their deepest thirst and help them understand that they are called to pursue what they long for by approaching the One who is the source of all things good. So often the Church has failed in this respect – and it can still do so. It has frequently opted – and it can still opt – to try to satisfy people's thirst by itself, out of its own resources. In this case, the Church has become and can still become a cistern of stagnant water rather than a pointer to *the source of living springs*: Jesus Christ!

All that to say that perhaps we shouldn't be as afraid of our dissatisfactions as we sometimes are. They are signs of good spiritual health. An awareness of our barrenness can be a real blessing since it arouses within us a thirst for God. When we don't thirst for God we suffer from *soul sickness* and that is a serious illness. The hymn writer Fr Frederick William Faber wrote: *Lack of desire is the ill of all ills*. This should lead us to feel consoled by our desire for God – however uncomfortable it may sometimes leave us feeling. For, if lack of desire is *the ill of all ills*, then, a pining, a longing, a thirsty desire for God, is surely a sign that all is well with us!

Amen!