

Sacred Heart of Jesus (A)
(Deuteronomy 7:6-11 / Matthew 11:25-30)
19.06.2020

You are a people consecrated to the Lord your God; it is you that the Lord our God has chosen to be His very own people out of all the peoples of the earth. This word of God, first spoken to the people of Israel, is addressed to us this morning. It invites all of us to think of our consecration to the Lord. It encourages us to think of, and give thanks for, our chosenness. What is made abundantly clear by the inspired word spoken to the people through Moses is that the choice God has made of them – and that means God’s choice of us today – was not based on any self-attained merit, but solely on the Lord’s own free gift of love. We read: *If the Lord set His heart on you and chose you, it was not because you outnumbered other peoples: you were the least of all the peoples. It was for love of you.* At this point we are immediately reminded by the Deuteronomist that along with the call to serve the Lord, by lives consecrated to Him, comes a promise of freedom. We read: *The Lord brought you out with His mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery.* All this shows us that what the Lord awaits from His people, from us, is a free will response to His call to honour Him by our lives. This is so important for us to grasp. I cannot insist enough on the fact that our call to the Lord’s service is not to be considered as locking us into any form of servitude, but as a grace that sets us free. We are called, as one liturgical formula puts it, *to love and serve the Lord.* Love and service go together... and both lead to freedom. We are called to love and to serve the Lord in full freedom of heart. If there is no freedom, there is no love. If there is no love in our hearts, there will be no genuine spirit of service. I frequently recall the very simple message printed on a greeting card sent to me by my late mother when she was made aware that a particular service had been confided of me in community at a relatively at early stage in my monastic life. The card read: *To love is to serve.*

It seems to me that the Gospel passage heard this morning makes the point that the service we are called to, should not be considered by us as an unbearable burden – something hard, to be endured without any joy. We are not meant just *to grin and bear it.* We are called to come to the point where we appreciate the yoke laid upon us as a grace: something that helps us learn to walk in communion with the Lord – united to Him in love. The passage from Matthew 11 proposed for our meditation this morning makes it clear to us that the Lord doesn’t want to see any of us overwhelmed by what is asked of us in His service. To the contrary! He wants us to be relieved from anything that feels like a weight too heavy to bear. He says: *Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened.* The text goes on to state that what the Lord desires for us is, as one paraphrase of the text puts it, that we come to journey with Him in life *walking according to the unforced rhythm of grace.* This is what stems from our being truly yoked to the Lord. To be yoked to Christ is to share our whole life with Him, and, not least, all our labours, recognising that He has chosen to share His life and His work with us... remembering that *His yoke is easy and His burden light.* We are called to walk with the Lord, engaged in *the work of God,* aware that *unless the Lord build the house all our labour is in vain.*

As I considered in my *lectio divina* last evening what the two readings heard today call us to live, a key New Testament figure came to mind. I thought of the one who is referred to in the Fourth Gospel as *the Beloved Disciple* – that person whom we believe to have been the evangelist John. I recalled how a great mystic St Gertrude, a woman of the Benedictine tradition, recounted how she was once graced by a vision of the evangelist St John. In that vision the Beloved Disciple revealed to her the meaning of the beating heart of Jesus, which

he had come to understand leaning upon the Master's breast at the Last Supper. John is reported to have revealed to Gertrude that *the beating heart of Jesus longs to be heard in a world grown old and cold – a world which stands in need of divine love which rejuvenates and rekindles*. Is it not the case that the Church in which we live today is one which has also grown and cold, in so many respects. The Church of our own day and age stands in need of rejuvenation. The fire of the Gospel needs to be rekindled; it needs to be fanned into a new flame in all our hearts.

And so it is that the simple invitation I address to you this morning – an invitation that I have heard for myself and feel called to share with you – is just to recline close to Jesus, to re-pose ourselves near to Him. The call is to place our heads – heads so often swirling with thoughts, worries, concerns, as well as questions of all sorts – on the heart of Christ and resting there just to listen quietly in the silence... to listen attentively with the ear of our heart to the strong and constant rhythm of Christ's heartbeat. When we do that, we will come to understand that the word the Lord has to speak to us is a reassuring one: a reminder of the constancy of the Lord's love for us. This is a message we need to hear always – and not least in uncertain times, like those we are traversing at present.

Celebrating this morning's Eucharist, I am acutely aware of many people whose hearts are troubled; of many people whose hearts are sad. I think of those whose hearts are broken; those whose hearts are pierced by love, a love which is suffering right now because of the worries they are carrying for people dear to them whose welfare is a major concern for them. Like me, many of you will know such people. Many of us may be such people ourselves.

As we celebrate this Eucharist, let us pray with and for all those whom the Lord has laid it upon our hearts to remember, asking us to support and sustain them by our prayer. Let us ask for all these folk, and for ourselves, the grace to hear the heartbeat of Jesus which speaks of God's love for humanity... God's love for each and every person whom He has loved into being and for whom He cares so deeply.

The invitation I hear addressed to us this morning is to dare to respond, at one and the same time, simply and audaciously, to Jesus' invitation: *Come to Me; draw close to Me. Recline next to My heart, as the Beloved Disciple did; linger there with me*. We read in John 13: *The disciple Jesus loved was reclining next to Jesus... He leaned back on Jesus' breast*. We should not feel in any way embarrassed by this scene; we should not grow shy at this thought or run away from it. We would do well not to hurry past it, or brush over what is said here. We would do well stay with it and, in staying with it, seek to enter deeply into it. Something profound is revealed to us here. The importance of proximity to Jesus: a proximity that is not afraid of the intimacy of *heart to heart* encounter. Today, may we let *heart speak to heart*, as Newman liked to say. Clearly, Jesus was not embarrassed or intimidated by John and clearly John was not embarrassed or intimidated by Jesus. They were content to be in each other's company. So should we be happy to draw close to the Lord and to welcome His drawing close to us – including, those times when He draws close to us, in and through other people, in whom He express His loving attention to us.

As John reclined on Jesus' breast in the Upper Room, he discovered who he really was: *the disciple Jesus loved*. This discovery permitted John to unashamedly write of himself as such when he came to compose his Gospel account, in which he referred to himself as, *the Beloved Disciple, the one whom Jesus loved*.

In a flash of understanding, as he reclined next to the Master in the Upper Room, John experienced Jesus as the human face of God... God who is love. This led him to go on to write those marvellous Letters he composed and addressed to the Church community confided to his care: letters in which he invited his readers to be more consciously aware of the caring face of God and the loving heart of God which they were called to be for each other in the life they shared.

May today's celebration encourage us to lay our heads on Jesus' breast and listen to His heartbeat, allowing it to *affect* us, to touch our *affective self* deeply... to renew a sense both of God's love for us and God's love within us. May the grace of God's freeing love be renewed and released within our hearts. Contemplating the Sacred Heart of Jesus may we come to appreciate the sacredness of our own hearts and the sacredness of the hearts of all around us. May our hearts come to be like that of Jesus. May we be able to appropriate these words of the psalmist: *You have put into my heart a marvellous and greater love for Your faithful ones, who dwell in the land* – and the whole world over, remembering that today's Solemnity speaks to us of the Universal Love of God, from which no one is excluded.

Amen!