

The Sacred Heart of Jesus
(Hosea 11:1.3-4.8-9 / John 19:31-37)
11.06.2021

What a beautiful image of God's tenderness we find in Hosea's prophetic words heard this morning! The Lord is depicted as having *loved Israel as a child*, as having *taught Ephraim how to walk*. He is shown to have done everything right by His cherished child; to have educated His beloved offspring tenderly. The prophet puts these words in the Lord's own mouth: *I took them in my arms; I led them with the reins of kindness, the leading strings of love. I was like someone who lifts an infant close to his cheek, stooping down to him, I gave him food*. There is a poignancy to those lines, especially when we read them in parallel with the extract from St John's Passion Narrative proposed for our meditation this morning. Therein we are led to contemplate to where the immense love that God held in His heart led His Only-Begotten Son: to death upon a cross. In the person of Jesus raised upon the cross what we see is *God's Love Crucified*. Reading Hosea's words while considering the gift Jesus made of His life on the cross for His people's salvation, we might ask ourselves: *How is it that those whom God loved so much could not see to what extent He loved them? How is it that His very own People – His chosen ones – still did not understand God's love for them and for the whole world? How could those to whom the Lord showed His constant love be unfaithful to Him over and over again? Why is it that people are so ungrateful?* To answer those questions we need look no further than ourselves. For, let's face it, our own track record is not always good. I fear many of us would have to admit that often we take God's love for us for granted – and other people's love for us for granted as well. We are not always as appreciative as we should be of the tender, loving care shown to us. We can be ungrateful for and dismissive of the attention and goodness displayed by the Lord and by others in our regard. While the apostle exhorts us to *consider the love God has lavished upon us* we can be so inconsiderate... thoughtless even. It happens that we call into question God's love for us and/or for others. We can dismiss what is said about God's love for humanity as just not credible. We can doubt God's love for us. We can deny it. Just think of the many false images of God we can harbour in our hearts and allow to surface at times. There are those who think of God for themselves, and present Him to others, as a remote deity, a far-off God, who is angry, mean, hard-hearted, harsh and judgmental, rather than a God who has drawn near to us in Christ-Jesus... so near to us as to live in heart to heart communion with us and to want to see us enjoy a real level of intimacy with Him. There are those – even in our Churches – who present God as One who is condemnatory of the masses; One who loves just some chosen few, predestined to be the objects of His favour, while the rest don't really count in His eyes. To think in these terms is to contradict and deny the image of God the Bible presents to us. When we read the Bible the God we encounter therein is a God who is generously merciful. He is One in Whom there is *fullness of redemption*. He is a God who is patient, loving and kind, slow to anger, gentle and forbearing in His dealings with His people. We can do so much injustice to God by thinking of Him in terms that are not in accord with the Scriptural presentation of the God of Tenderness and of Universal Love.

Today's Solemnity is a reminder to us that the Lord Jesus' open heart reveals to us God's Universal Love. Devotion to the Sacred Heart was promoted at a time when the heresy of Jansenism in the seventeenth century had attempted to mar one of the essential dogmas of Christianity; namely, the love of God for the whole of humanity. The Church's invitation to the faithful to contemplate Christ's open heart wanted to help them savour the mystery of God's all-embracing love. This is what today's Solemnity still seeks to awaken within us. What we celebrate today should lead us to appreciate and rejoice in God's love for each and

every person whom He has brought into being, including those who fail to recognise His love for them. What we are called to remember today is God's love not just for ourselves, and not just for some chosen few like us, but for all others. I find myself thinking especially today of those who while they once knew God's love for them and believed in it, have now forgotten it or ceased to credit it. I find myself thinking today of those who are overcome by sentiments of guilt or filled with a sense of self-loathing. I think of those tortured and tormented by feelings of deep shame. Sometimes these feelings may be understandable – perhaps they (maybe, we ourselves) have committed great wrongs, made terrible mistakes, but, since with the Lord there is mercy, even the legitimate shame we may sometimes feel should not be allowed to grip us to the point of paralysing us. Perhaps my thoughts for such people (those who are feeling lost right now) are oriented by something that happened as I reflected on the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart the other evening. As I sat with today's Scripture readings, the abbey phone rang. It was late. I took the call. On the other end of the line was a man who was feeling particularly low within himself. He spoke and he cried. Through his tears he voiced the terrible malaise he was feeling. He lamented his loneliness. He expressed his pain. He spoke with regret of what he had once known in his life by way of spiritual consolation. It was clear the other night that the peace this man had once known now eluded him completely. It appeared to him to be so far off that it seemed totally unattainable. *I will never know again what I once knew*, he kept saying. This man was buying into the lie that once we have offended God there is no way of ever being forgiven by Him. It struck me as I listened to this suffering man that we can all buy into the same lie sometimes. There can be low-ebb moments in all our lives; times when we can think of ourselves as people who have been – or should be – written-off. What the Scriptures would have us understand is that there is no such thing as a *write-off* in God's eyes. The whole of Hosea's prophecy makes exactly the opposite point. On our bad days, just like the man who spoke to me by 'phone the other night, we may be tempted to ask ourselves: *How could God love me?* We might be tempted to ask: *How could God (or anyone else for that matter) still love me, given my failures, my falls, and the thoroughly miserable state I am in?* The Lord responds to us saying: *Oh, how can I give up on you? ... How can I let you go? How can I abandon or forsake you? My heart cries out within Me; how I long to help you! ... For I am God and not man; I am the Holy One living among you, and I did not come to destroy!* Writing to the Romans, the apostle Paul makes the point that there is absolutely nothing we can do or admit to that would cause God to stop loving us! Paul affirms: *I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Death can't and life can't.... all the powers of hell itself cannot keep God's love away. Our fears... our worries... nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God demonstrated by our Lord Jesus Christ when He died for us.* It is bearing those words in mind that we can and should contemplate the open heart of Jesus as He hangs upon the cross. The heart of Jesus – God's humble and gentle love revealed therein – turns no one away.

While we might sometimes be tempted to think of *Sacred Heart Devotion* as somewhat outdated – a mere *devotion* to be relegated to the past, a mode of expression more suited to a bygone era; while we meet think back nostalgically (but not too seriously) to a time when Catholic families had Sacred Heart pictures hanging in the kitchens and living rooms of their homes, with the family members' names written into the Consecration formula below the *Sacred Heart Image*; while we might think, in our imagined sophistication, that such *devotion* is suited only to those we might call rather arrogantly *just simple folk* – people with no theological formation, it may surprise us to know how a great thinker such as P. Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, (a philosopher, theologian and scientist of renown) had a profound devotion to the Sacred Heart. This devotion was not just a *pious aside* for him. P. de Chardin explained more than once in his writings how a relationship to the Sacred Heart of Jesus underlay his

whole thought process. He explained how in the presentation of God his mother made to him in his tender, childhood, years, she had taught him what became essential to his life: *a loving relationship with and deep reverence for God made incarnate in the Word made flesh, in the Sacred Heart*. Teilhard spelt out how he found therein what he called *a centre for his world*. He explained how he found *God's love universalised and humanised in the heart of Jesus*. He found *the world personalised* because he could see that its centre was a heart: the Sacred Heart of Jesus. P. Teilhard noted how when his eyes were fixed upon the Lord's heart, his love for life and his yearnings for God came together. Contemplating the heart of Jesus, Teilhard's identity both as a Christian and a lover of this world was found to be reconciled; his vocation both as a priest and a scientist were integrated; he arrived at a comfortable sense of being a man of God and a man of his time in this world. Let me quote his own words: *I have never had at any point in my life the slightest difficulty in addressing God as a supreme SOMEONE,...centre to centre, heart to heart... Going in this direction was made easier by the fact that my mother's God was above all, for me as well as for her, the incarnate Word... It would be difficult to make anyone understand how deeply, vigorously and constantly my religious life developed under the sign of and in wonderment at the heart of Jesus.*

For those of us who might shy away from the notion of *far too sugary* devotion/devotions to the Sacred Heart, lines from de Chardin's retreat notes dating from 1939 may help us distinguish between pious (but far too restrictive and petty) '*devotions*' and real heart to heart loving contemplation of the Heart of Jesus. P. de Chardin remarks: *I would like to spread, effectively, the attraction (I do not want to say the word 'devotion', much too sentimental and too weak) to the universal Christ, to the true heart of Jesus*. For Teilhard the heart of Jesus was a wide, open heart. It was certainly not one hemmed into Catholic '*devotions*' alone. It embraced the whole world. It is to be hoped that our lives are led to develop as this great witness' life did – *under the sign of and in wonderment at the heart of Jesus*. Clearly, the Sacred Heart that Teilhard *knew* and looked to was big enough to embrace the whole world, while being human and personal enough to know him, Teilhard, intimately; to call him by name, to love him totally and unconditionally. May it be in this way that we look to the heart of Jesus today. May we come to see Christ's heart for what it truly is: the all-embracing heart of God's love... the sign that God's love is universal. May we be led to understand that God's love welcomes all and sundry... that it is a love that excludes absolutely no one... a love which turns none away. We sang in the Alleluia verse before today's Gospel reading those words of invitation which are addressed to us by Jesus Himself: *Come to me*. Let us dare to go to the school of the heart of Jesus whose gentle and humble love turns no one away, trusting that in it we will find rest for our souls.

I know some of us will be led on this day to think of loved ones who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith. Let us do so with renewed trust in the Lord who has welcomed them with open arms and a warm heart into the embrace of His eternal love.

With the diocesan Church of Dromore we think of Fr Tony Corr whose funeral liturgy is celebrated at this same hour. May he rest in peace and rise in glory!

Amen!