

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; ...[this charity, this Love] ; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things

The epistle for today is St Paul's great hymn to love. It is a favourite choice at weddings, because it speaks so clearly of what we want and hope for in our relationships. But it also presents a problem—why is this love so difficult to find? How do we distinguish this love from false promises?

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; ... rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things

While this may be a popular choice at weddings, it's important to know that the love described there is not first a human love. At the end of St Paul's description of spiritual gifts in 1Cor 12, he goes on to describe 'a more excellent way'. The love which St Paul extols is not a feeling, but nothing less than the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the soul, and in the body of Christ¹ The love which St Paul describes is a reflection in human life of the divine love, the bond of Love which unites the Father and the Son.

But how can we see and enjoy a love which so surpasses our frail and weak human loves? This is the problem which our readings address, it is the problem to which worship gives a kind of answer.

THEN Jesus took unto him the twelve, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man shall be accomplished.

The 12 disciples picture to us the Church in miniature. In a few days, on Ash Wednesday, the invitation which is made, in the name of the Church, to keep a Holy Lent is simply a response and an echo of this first summons to go up to Jerusalem. That is one basic reason why it's important to gather together on Ash Wednesday: Christ addresses the whole Church, His body – it is an invitation we need to hear together, a journey we can only make together, however much we also need to make it ourselves.

Well, what happens at Jerusalem, what are we invited to see?

For he shall be delivered unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and spitefully entreated, and spitted on: and they shall scourge him, and put him to death; and the third day he shall rise again.

This, it won't surprise you, is not a reading usually chosen for weddings. But, what our Lord describes here is simply the working out of love which St Paul hymns and praises.² What leads Christ to Jerusalem and to the cross is love, what he displays there is love. The goal of the Lenten journey is that we both see this love, and that this love is shaped in us, that this love possesses us.

¹ This love is not a feeling or an idea, but a virtue, a settled habit or disposition which is the presence of Spirit of God. When hope and faith possess that for which they aspire, there remains only love, the bond which unites the lover and the beloved, the love which is, supremely and beyond our understanding, the love of the divine persons for one another, and the love which is poured into our hearts. The love which St Paul describes is a reflection in human life of the divine love.

² Without this connection, the message of 1 Cor 13 is easily marred, and the love described there reduced to a flimsy human sentiment which lasts as long as it lasts and is then left behind.

And they understood none of these things: and this saying was hid from them, neither knew they the things which were spoken.

The three-fold repetition emphasizes the disciples lack of understanding. In the same way that the invitation is to us, this three-fold repetition of the blindness of the first apostles is to us, a mirror in which we are invited to examine our not seeing both journey and the destination.

But surely our situation is different, surely we are not blind like the disciples? Here it might be helpful to notice that part of the challenge of the readings these past three weeks has been a challenge to recognize a form of blindness in us.

It was there two weeks ago, on Septuagesima Sunday,³ in the question: ***Is thine eye evil, because I am good?*** Can't you see?

It was there in the Gospel last week, in the disciples not understanding the parable, and in our Lord's enigmatic promise that ***that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand.***⁴

This echo of not understanding and not seeing in the readings leading up to Lent suggests that there is something fundamental here. There is, no doubt, an element of judgement: we

³ On Septuagesima we heard the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. At the end of the day, all were paid, no matter how long they worked, with the one denarius, the one penny, of the all-sufficient grace of Christ. Did we share, in any small way, in the envy of those who have '***borne the burden and heat of the day***' against those who labour for but one hour and still receive the same all-sufficient grace? If, in the mirror of the Word of grace, we recognized something of that envy or frustration in ourselves, then we must hear also the rebuke: ***Take that thine is, and go thy way ... Is thine eye evil, because I am good?*** This just another form of the rebuke in today's Gospel: ***And they understood none of these things***

⁴ Then, last week, the Gospel put before us the parable of the sower who sows the seed of the Word of God in different types of soil, in different types of soul, and in different types of Church. But the disciples, once again, didn't understand, ***neither knew they the things which were spoken.*** Even more surprising, our Lord told them that this not understanding was part of his message: ***And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand.***

This prophecy was a very important one for the leaders of the Oxford Movement. For them, it described the 'reserved' character of God's revelation to humanity, the Tractarian doctrine of Reserve, a description of the purposeful mixture of clarity and obscurity in the Bible. Isaac Williams, J H Newman's curate at the University Church in Oxford, and a close colleague of both Pusey and Keble, wrote two of the longer tracts for the times, 'On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge': 'There appears,' writes Williams, 'in God's manifestations of Himself to mankind, in conjunction with an exceeding desire to communicate that knowledge, a tendency to conceal, and throw a veil over it, as if it were injurious to us, unless we were of a certain disposition to receive it'. Critics charged Williams of trying to keep back the 'whole counsel of God', so that he came to be regarded 'almost as the most wicked and dangerous of the Tractarians'.

The Tractarian response was to emphasise that this prophecy of not-seeing and not-understanding is not simply a prophecy of condemnation or judgement, but rather a promise that this divine holding-back is part of the work of grace, part of the way in which the word which is proclaimed is also received and engrafted in our souls. In formulating the doctrine of Reserve, the Tractarians drew on work of 18thth c. Bp of Durham, Bishop Butler. Butler argued that there is a kind of 'moral probation' in how we understand the message of the Bible. Butler aged that the act of reading and seeking to understand is a kind of trial, a spiritual or ascetic exercise. In his homily of Scripture, Cranmer quotes St Augustine to make this same point, 'For, as St. Augustine saith, the knowledge of holy Scripture is a great, large, and a high palace, and the door is very low; so that the high and arrogant man cannot run in, but he must stoop low and humble himself that shall enter into it.' Augustine elaborates this point in his guide to reading the Bible, *On Christian Doctrine*, the 'ambiguities and obscurities' of Scripture were 'provided by God to conquer pride by work and to combat disdain in our minds, to which those things which are easily discovered seem frequently to become worthless'. This trial is necessary to overcome that pride and disdain 'by which those things which are easily discovered seem frequently to become worthless'. Seeking to understand what comes to us not only in light, but also in half-light and darkness, is a kind of sanctifying reading. Entering into the passion of our Lord happens in our reading and understanding as well as in our lives. It should not surprise us that we find ourselves struggling to recognize our Lord out of the corner of our eye.

don't see because our hearts are hardened, we love the wrong things, or we love the right things in the wrong measure, the wrong kind of way, and so our understanding is darkened.

But this message of not-seeing and not-understanding is not all judgement, it is also full of promise. What we have to receive is so great and good that it can simply be communicated by a one-dimensional series of words—we need to go further in and further up, what is promised is not simply spoken, it must be worked out in our souls, given to be received in the Body of Christ.

On the one hand, we may already know a great deal about the Passion which we are invited to go up to see again. But even if we have made this journey to Jerusalem and to the cross many times already, we need to know that in relation to the riches of the wisdom and goodness of God we are still functionally blind, and, praise God, this is good news: we have more to learn, and to receive, and to see, than we can even ask or imagine.

The journey of the cross which our Lord describes is, on the one hand, open for all to see. On the other hand, it remains a mystery, the things which we see are tips of the iceberg, revelations which express a depth of the divine wisdom and love which are unfathomable, a 'boundless Ocean of everlasting joy'. Whatever we know already of the cross and passion of Christ is not a final destination, it is more like the arrival at a hill-top which reveals another vista to be enjoyed and entered into.

Unless we know that we still share in something of blindness of the first disciples, the not-seeing and not-understanding, we are like children with their hands closed, unable to receive what the Father would give.

Just let me give one example.⁵ It is very hard for human mind to accept that the all-powerful and all-wise God chooses a kind of weakness and death to achieve his purposes. Accepting that is the work of a life-time. But more than this, this not accepting the message of the cross for Christ is also a not accepting of the message of the cross for ourselves, the particular form the cross takes in our lives. We learn what it means to see the passion of Christ, and to recognize it, as we learn the way in which this passion is worked out in our lives, not in the great battles, but often in the little ones. As we struggle with the day to day trials of frustration, in daily obligations and necessities, in work and at home, we learn to recognize the form of the passion of Christ in our lives, and we learn to recognize the outpouring of His love. These two go hand and hand.

Whatever we know of the wisdom and love of God, there is still so much more to see. Love of God is so much above our capacities to grasp or understand, that it is as if we remain blind. This is not depressing, but a wonderful encouragement. Whatever we know of the love of God, we have more to learn or receive than we can even imagine.

But we are not simply left with this message, we see it worked out in the Gospel miracle: *As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.*⁶

⁵ The disciples not understanding the message of the Passion is a form of the problem for which St Peter was rebuked. When our Lord first tells the disciples that he will suffer and will die, Peter, who had just confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, refused to accept the message of the cross. Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, *Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.*

⁶In the 2nd Book of Kings we learn that Jericho was rebuilt only when the builder sacrificed his children and buried them in the walls. Jericho is a kind of God-given metaphor for St Augustine's earthly city, the city built in contempt for the love described in 1 Cor 13, which sees the passion as simply failure, or, we might say, the city where the aspiration for glory is mixed up with self-destruction. Human blindness is connected with living in the shadow of this city.

Have you noticed that the blind man is already part of our worship each week? He cries out ***Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!***

We make his words our own every time we come to Mass: *Lord have mercy on us. Christ Have mercy on us, Lord have mercy on us.* Whenever we pray these words, whenever choir sings them, we pray with the man who wants to see.⁷

Very important – what happens next? The crowd tells the man to be quiet. Sometimes, this is the voice of the world: don't take that religion stuff too seriously, Don't admit your blind, don't be so weak and stupid. Sometimes, it is our own voice, a kind of despair: I'm tired and worn down, why bother, I cannot ever change.

The blind man shows the better way: ***but he cried so much the more, Son of David, have mercy on me.*** It is not only when we gather here week by week or day by day that we makes this prayer. The disciplines of Lent are all ways by which we put flesh on this prayer.⁸

Christ, of course, does not pass by the man who calls out. Christ addresses the man, each one of us and He address the Church: ***What do you want me to do for you?***

Let us begin the journey of Lent with expectation, with faith and with hope. The journey to Jerusalem is a journey toward the love of God, in the love of God. if we know ourselves, and how difficult it is to be shaped by genuine love, then we know that this cannot be an easy journey. The failures and the struggles won't surprise us. Our Lord does not pass by, he stops to ask 'What do you want me to do for you?' What do you want me to give you?

The Love which is described by St Paul is the same Love which takes our Lord and all His disciples to Jerusalem and to the cross. Whatever we know of this love, there is more to be discovered. This is not just a message give in words, it is given to us in sacrament, as our food in the holy communion today. The destination of our journey is sometimes pictured in art as a women, Ecclesia, standing next to the cross and next to the crucified love of God. Out of the saviour's side flows the blood which Ecclesia collects in a chalice. We don't just hear about the love of God today, it is given to us as our spiritual food and drink.

O LORD, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth: Send thy Holy Spirit, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever lives is counted dead before thee: Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

words 2000

⁷ The Church invites us to recognize that in some way we also are sitting blind on the roadside in the shadow of Jericho.

⁸ If we have in some way recognized our blindness, then we recognize our need to allow the Holy Spirit to drive us into an uncomfortable form of wilderness, to face the temptation that we would rather numb over in our favourite way, conceal, or ignore. Making space more space in our lives during Lent for prayer is a basic way of calling out to the Lord who draws near with his disciples, in other words, with and in the Church.