

4th Sunday of Advent (C)
(Micah 5:1-4 / Luke 1:39-44)
21.12.2015

In today's gospel scene we see Mary reaching out to her cousin Elizabeth to be near to her in her hour of need. A reading of the passage which follows on from today's gospel text, shows how Mary, in her turn, allowed herself to be touched by the welcome Elizabeth afforded her. I believe the encounter between these two women can be understood as speaking to us about how we are all called to relate to each other.

If we were honest, I think most of us would have to admit that we struggle to relate to others, and also to allow them to relate to us, *in love and truth*. Fair enough, we have contact with many people and they with us, but often no real meeting takes place and this is sad. It is sad that in many of our lives we just pass beside and, on frequent occasions, simply ignore what could and should be graced encounters. It is sad that we can interact with so many people and yet be really known by so few (if any at all) ... for the person we truly are. Yesterday I came across a line in a book in which the author said of someone who knew him really well (the author spoke of this person as the one who knew him better than anyone else): *He knew about twenty-five per cent of me ... which is probably twenty-four per cent more than anybody else!*

How much of any of *us* is truly known? And, to begin with, even to ourselves? For most of us it could be said that if we are a mystery to others, by and large, we are a mystery also to ourselves! In a world wherein *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts seem to reveal and share everything and anything, leading people to recount where they are at and what they are doing at every instant, day in and day out, the truth is that so few people really say or truly make known where they are at in life.

In their *communications* or *postings*, life is most often presented as one great party event, but real life is never one great party! Anyone who has ever truly lived will know this and have the honesty to admit it. To pretend that life is one great party does not help anyone. The pretence only makes the one pretending feel all the more unreal and lonely; in the extreme, it can make them feel totally despondent. A life of pretence ends up isolating the person trying to fool him or her self and others too. Those who live in pretence end up cut off from themselves, distanced from their own reality and therefore incapable of truly relating to others. Just think of it. When someone puts him or her self at the centre of the circle and finds their pleasure in seeing others dancing around them admiringly, what has happened? They have extracted themselves from the circle of life all around them. They are no longer part of the flow of life energy which is to be found only when one is really connected to others in the circle/circulation of life.

People can have thousands of *Followers and Friends* (in the sense used by *Facebook/Twitter* jargon – but that is all these words amount to in the *IT/virtual* – unreal – world: jargon!) ... They can have hoards of followers and yet not have one person who well and truly walks by their side: not one person who is ready to make any real effort to draw near to them at heart level.

We don't need *Followers*, we need companions for life's journey.

When Jesus invited people to follow Him, what He invited them to do was to walk alongside Him and to share in His life journey. For Jesus *follow me* means *walk alongside me, be my companion*. Jesus invited (and still invites) His followers to communion: communion in love.

We don't just need those who *call* themselves *Friends* (in Facebook language); what we need are those who *are* our real friends.

Real friends are never just *fair weather friends*. Real friends are people who are with us through thick and thin. They are people who are there for us when the crowd has shied away because we've been left exposed and vulnerable and are hurting deeply inside. They stand beside us when all the others have gone away. Real friends don't just make empty promises to always be there for us: they are there for us – always!

John understood Jesus' words to His disciples which he relayed to us in his gospel account: *I call you friends*. As a friend to Jesus, John, out of all the disciples, was the only one to stand by the foot

of the cross. He *was* there for Jesus!

The sad reality of our world is that there is such aching pain, such loneliness, such isolation! Recently I read that between fifty and sixty per cent of the population in the large urban areas (including among the *Jet Set* class) live alone! That says a lot! Many of these lonely people are great socialites. They are those everybody knows; those who attend all the right parties and receptions, but at the end of the day they go home alone. They may live at the centre of our cities to be connected, to never have far to go to meet others, but, in fact, they live at a great distance from those around them, they are really quite isolated. While living in our city centres, they are really living on the periphery of everything. The real sadness of their hearts (frequently unrecognised, unattended to, denied, fled from in fear) is due to their inability go deeper than the surface of things. Their basic alienation and estrangement is from their own *true self*. How sad and lonely a life we live, how disconnected we are, when we live far from our own *true self*!

As Christians (and, more fundamentally, simply as human beings) we are called to communion. The Scriptures attest that the call to communion stands at the heart of our Christian vocation. John's gospel is particularly strong on this point. To say that we are called to communion is another way of saying that we are called to live in and enjoy truly loving relationships. Understand me. I am not saying that it is easy to do so. It isn't! It is precisely around our yearning for communion – our desire to enjoy truly loving relationships – that we experience so much anguish. Why is this? It is suggested that this is due in no small part to fact that our society has become so fragmented, our family and community lives so sundered by physical and emotional distance, our friendships so sporadic, our intimacies so 'in-between' things and often so utilitarian.

There are those who say that they long for intimacy and love (I suppose we would all say that) and who are blind to the gifts of intimacy and love already present in their lives. Far away fields are seen as greener, what is not within one's grasp is sought out as what should be had, while what is God-given and already there is either cast aside or ignored.

To relate to others (and, to begin with, to relate to oneself) in genuine love and real truth is very challenging indeed! But, if we don't try to do this, the result is that we are doomed to stay locked in sadness – we condemn ourselves to do so! This only creates deeper pain and greater difficulties as the years go by. Eventually, our hearts shrivel up, they freeze, they die, if we do not garnish and keep alive the flame of love which God has placed in all our hearts.

It is a basic psychological law that we long to love and to be loved. This is what Christian life is meant to be about: *living in love*, which is just another way of saying *living in God*, for, according to the First Letter of St John, *God is love*!

At its heart, in essence, our experience of Church is meant to be an experience of communion. The New Testament writers John and Paul both emphasise this in their teaching.

For John, true relationships really are a matter of life and death. To be fully alive (and this is a basic call of John's, gospel), one must truly relate to others in love (John's epistles stress the importance of truth for loving relationships).

Paul, for his part, when he speaks of the communion to which we are called within the Church, uses imagery which likens the way we relate to each other to the articulation between the diverse members of one body. He stresses that we are called to relate to all the other members of the body of Christ, which is the Church, in an articulated, harmonious way. At the same time, he emphasises that we are to relate to each other in a way which is respectful of the differences between us. He sees the difference and uniqueness of each one as a source of mutual enrichment, rather than any kind of threat to the others.

What we see Elizabeth and Mary do in today's gospel is relate to each other *in truth and love*. The evidence of the truth of their meeting was the presence of Jesus in their encounter: a presence which made itself felt. *John leapt for joy in the womb* of his mother, because it was recognised that Mary, who came to Elizabeth, reaching out to her in love, carried the Christ-child within.

Elizabeth and Mary were both *filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit*, we are told. This *joy of the Holy Spirit* is nothing other than love poured into their human hearts. (St Paul tells us in Romans 5 that love is the Spirit poured into our hearts.). God's love, His Holy Spirit, was in the cousins' meeting. Elizabeth and Mary related to each other in a way that was respectful of where each one was at – each one recognising in the other the particular grace she was given to live at that moment, aware too of the challenge with which each one was presented in her particular situation. Their meeting was full of mutual attention and respect. They were truly there, each one *for* the other, each one *with* the other. Mary and Elizabeth exhibit what true is all about: being there *for* the other, being there *with* the other. They show us that love is about more than just words!

We should not pass over or ignore the fact that the vocation of both these women, while extraordinary, also carried challenges within it. What great understanding, mutual acceptance and affirmation these women displayed in each other's regard. They both needed this and they both received it. Understanding, mutual acceptance and affirmation are attitudes of heart displayed in every genuine, loving, caring relationship. We might ask if they are hallmarks of our relationships. Indeed, we might ask ourselves this even more fundamental question: do we really relate to others at all? Are love and truth present in our relationships? Do we relate to others in genuine love and complete truth?

Let us be honest enough to ask ourselves if our ways of relating to others are not so easily driven more by self-interest rather than by genuine care, concern and consideration for the other.

The encounter between Elizabeth and Mary was also filled with true blessing. This blessing was rooted in their presence to each other and their acknowledgement of the deeper, more real presence in their midst: that of the Christ, whom Mary carried within her.

The cultivation of a sense of presence to the other and even more to the One who is present in our midst in every true encounter is so important! It is a source of blessing we so often pass beside or ignore.

Henri Nouwen suggests in one place in a reflection on *Becoming the Beloved: The problem of modern living is that we are too busy – looking for affirmation in the wrong places? - to notice we are being blessed.* (...) He goes on to remark: *It has become extremely difficult for us to stop, listen, pay attention and receive gracefully what is offered to us.*

There are people (and those people can be us!) who spend their lives looking for love in places where it is not to be found, in people who are at a distance, while ignoring, passing beside or, worse still casting aside, the love that is offered to them right where they are, in those close to them.

Christmas is about that most fundamental relationship of love ever witnessed, the most fundamental relationship of love in our personal lives as much as in the life of the whole world: **God's love revealed in Christ Jesus!** This revelation of God's love, His reaching out to us, His giving Himself for us, calls forth a response of love from our hearts: a response of love for God and for others – all others, certainly, but, to begin with, those who are there for us, those who are there with us, part of our lives.

Christmas is not just about tinsel and *pressies*!

On this day when we read the Visitation gospel it is good to remember that Christmas is about more than just paying social calls, doing the rounds of what we consider to be obligatory *duty visits* to people we forget most of the year round!

If Christmas does not lead us to ask ourselves some very fundamental questions about where we are in life and on what we place our values, especially in regard to our relationships with others, then all it does is have us accumulate more rubbish and clutter and live a few more superficial *meetings* (though the word *meeting* is hardly adequate for something that is just superficial!).

If I had a suggestion to make for this Christmas, perhaps it would be for each one of us to engage ourselves to live one genuine encounter in love and truth – perhaps with a person we have neglected or avoided for far too long.

(If we manage more than one such meeting, all the better! One to start with would not be bad.)

When we do this, as the psalmist tells us, *righteousness* (that is God Himself) *smiles down from heaven*.

Reaching out to another and allowing another to touch us (as Mary and Elizabeth both did, each one going in both directions) leads us to bring joy to those with whom we relate and to know joy within our self: the joy experienced in true meetings is nothing less than the joy of the Holy Spirit which fills the very heart of God. Our joy is a gift which comes to us from the joy overflowing from the heart of God Himself.

If the baby *leapt in Elizabeth's womb* and both women were *filled with the Holy Spirit*, the Christ also rejoiced in the meeting into which Mary led Him and the Father's heart was also glad, for Christ's vocation was and remains to bring the joy of the Gospel into this oftentimes overshadowed, saddened world.