

6th Sunday of Easter (C)
(Acts 15:1-2. 22-29 / John 14:23-39)
01.05.2016

John Lennon of *The Beatles* fame once said: *If someone thinks that love and peace is a cliché that must have been left behind in the sixties, that's his problem. Love and peace are eternal.* Today's gospel passage shows us how, long before the sixties of the twentieth century, Jesus brought together in one discourse (His *Farewell Discourse* in John's gospel) the notions of *love and peace*.

Since love and peace are blessings we all long for, I suggest that in our gospel meditation this morning we reflect for a moment on these choicest gifts of God's grace.

The first thing that I would say is that the experience of God's love – and indeed, by extension, all true love – gives an inner security. It is a source of strength. When we know ourselves to be truly loved, really cared for; when we know ourselves to be wrapped in a mantle of tenderness we feel greatly fortified interiorly.

Clearly, given the context in which Jesus spoke the words heard in today's gospel passage, it was His intention to give His disciples strength for what lay ahead of them. Christ's passion was looming on the horizon. It was Jesus' desire to give His disciples a deep sense of trust for the forthcoming hour of trial that led Him to reassure them of His great love for them.

Listening to today's gospel passage, I think it is fair for us to parallel the notions of love and compassion. Compassion is a particular attitude of love which is shown to those who suffer; it is an attitude which we are called to show to people who are enduring trial and tribulation.

When compassion is offered to us in hours of suffering we no longer feel alone. This is so important! For, is it not true to say that suffering is inclined to make the person enduring it feel terribly lonely and even totally isolated? A person's pain is further compounded by the anxiety attached to the loneliness they experience in their agony.

The assurance that we are loved by others helps carry us through the painful passages of our lives. For us to be assured and certain that we are held in another's love is of great consolation to us when we traverse trouble and distress; it brings with it an extraordinary sentiment of relief, a profound peace.

I wonder if we have never experienced, even when we are at our most uptight, that just to be held by someone who truly loves us, can lead all the tension that has become pent up within us to subside? To be held by one who loves us, and truly cares for our well-being, can lead to a deep pacification in the very depths of our being. The peace we feel at such moments is none other than that of Christ who dwells within us and makes His presence known to us in the secret recesses of our heart.

There are many Scripture passages which testify to the fortifying grace given to those who are suffering by the assurance of people's compassionate love and concern for them. I won't give a list of such texts, but, as I speak right now, some passages in Paul's writings come to mind. More than once we hear the apostle tell us he was comforted just to know that people cared about him. It reassured Paul to know that good people were concerned for his welfare. It strengthened the apostle to know that others were *there* for him – if only in spirit. He speaks of being greatly comforted by the arrival of those sent to him. Even when people were unable to be physically at hand, for Paul to know that they were in spiritual proximity to him greatly relieved his suffering; this assurance strengthened the apostle to keep on going.

In like manner, it helps us when God's loving care and concern are expressed through other people: our troubled hearts are pacified. Just to know that someone is there with us when the going is tough in our lives brings us comfort; it offers us a consolation that can make all the difference.

Very recently I listened to someone speak of the painful reality of suicide and its consequences. Suicide is a big issue in Irish society at present. This is true both north and south of the border. (In one parish alone in the Irish Midlands there were seven suicidal deaths in the first two weeks of April, 2016.) A fundamental point made by the speaker was one we all know, but can so easily forget: namely, that each one of us is called to be supportive in regard to those who need us to be there with them and for them. It is required of us to be actively on the *look out* for those who are suffering in our communities of life – sometimes right under our very noses. It is vital that we grasp that it is within the possibility of each and every one of us to draw alongside brothers and sisters who are going through a hard time on their life journey. None of us should underestimate the role we can play to make all the difference in another person's life – the difference we can make may quite literally be the difference between life and death for that person. Suicide is evidently an extreme circumstance. Things don't have to go to such extremes for us to be solicited to show ourselves to be men and women of compassion: brothers, sisters, to those who are in pain and distress.

In today's gospel, Jesus promised: *I will not abandon you or leave you as orphans*. He went on to say to His disciples: *I will come to you*. Christ comes to us in the storms of life. He reminded His disciples that His Spirit was with them and in them. To be animated by the Lord's Holy Spirit carries with it the responsibility to demonstrate that we are agents of God's compassionate love for others.

It is in and through His disciples – in and through us – that the Lord chooses to render Himself present to the troubled world in which we live.

Our God of compassion wants to be present to those who stand in need of the reassurance of His comforting grace through us. In the same way that many of us will have been graced to feel God's proximity to us through brothers and sisters who dared to draw alongside us when we needed them most, so we can be there with and for people who need us today.

We have seen that there is a security given to a person who is suffering when they are reassured that they are not alone.

Of course, there are some persons – indeed, there are many in this position – who will always find it difficult to welcome help offered to them. There are those who really struggle to believe in and feel God's love and that of others. In our broken – often fickle – world there are many persons whose life experience hitherto has not helped them in this regard. They find it hard to credit that love can bring real security and carry a blessing of deep peace within it. I am thinking of those who have been exploited hitherto in abusive relationships. I am thinking of those who have been disappointed, hurt, betrayed, badly let down, in the past. Deep pain and injury endured can have a long-lasting impact. Some people can find it well-nigh impossible to be able to relate to anyone with trust ever again. A feeling of loss (an accompanying lost-ness) a sentiment of profound loneliness, will be experienced when someone who was loved and respected has failed the person who trusted in them and, moreover, entrusted themselves to them. What is experienced in such circumstances is perceived as nothing less than a terrible and terrifying abandonment. If the person who has been the cause of much pain has in some way used the one they have hurt to their advantage

hitherto, then what will be felt by the injured party may well feel like nothing less than the trauma of violation.

The words Jesus speaks in today's gospel passage are His response to a question that so many people can find themselves asking when they have endured and are still caught up in painful circumstances: *How could I ever trust anyone again, how could I ever trust love again, given the hurt and pain I have experienced in my life?*

Through the words we hear Christ speak this morning, we are called to understand that no matter how much others may have been a disappointment to us, no matter how much they have let us down, Christ's love will never fail those who confide themselves to Him. God's love can always be trusted, for the Lord is ever steadfast.

In his First Letter, John (the author of the Fourth Gospel) makes the point that no matter how much others may have been a source of deception to us and even failed us completely, the Lord will never let us down. Here is what John writes in chapter 4 of his First Letter: *God showed us how much He loved us by sending His only Son into this world to bring us eternal life.* He then goes on to say: *In this act we see what real love is.* (I really like that translation of the text.) *Real love* is shown in the person of Christ. It is shown to be a love which is self-giving love. Self-giving love does not think of its own interests first, but rather those of the one loved. Self-giving love is a love which meets the loved one's deepest need and eases their most powerful insecurity by saying: *I am here for you. I stand beside you. I am with you.* The phrases I have just used there (and many other similar phrases could be added to these) are all expressions that punctuate the Sacred Scriptures. They come back like a refrain in the story of God's dealings with His people. They are offered to reassure God's people as they make their pilgrim way through this world. We are called to hear these words as words addressed to us today. But, that is not all. More than that, we are also called to echo these words. We are called to be able to make the Lord's words our own and to live up to them in regard to those who count upon us.

Those who live their lives *in Christ* are called to reflect the Lord's way of being with and for others. They are called not just to pay lip-service to Jesus' words, but match them by their actions and illustrate them by their whole way of being.

We are called to be there for others – with them and for them. To help us in this mission, the Holy Spirit, *the Comforter*, is given to us. It is surely important that we hold on to the promise of this gift and that we consider and strive to live out something of the apostle Paul's experience which is shared with us in what he wrote to the Corinthians: *Just as God comforted us in our sorrows so we are called to offer comfort to others in their sorrows; we are called to offer them the same comfort that we ourselves have received from the Lord.*

Just as the Holy Spirit ministers God's compassion to us, so we are called to minister that same compassionate love to our brothers and sisters. To use words attributed to Francis of Assisi (whether or not he ever actually used them is questionable, of course) we are called to become *instruments of Christ's peace*. We fulfil that mission by being there with those who are experiencing trouble; holding those who are suffering close, carrying them in our heart and prayer.

There are many around us – doubtless, there are surely some here today – who are dealing with stress and anxiety, grief and loss in their lives. All these people long for peace – just as each one of us longs to know in our lives that God-given gift which stems from His love.

There are many who are struggling in their personal and family lives; there are some who may be wondering if they didn't make some terribly big mistake in their life-choice; there are others who may have lost a job or not have a job; there are those who are grieving a spouse, a child, a sibling, a friend; there are others still who find themselves caught in webs of addiction; others who are suffering from depression, feeling worthless, hopeless, empty inside. There are some who have been betrayed and others who feel the weight of guilt associated with having been a betrayer.

The call addressed to all to whom Christ speaks His message of peace is a call to welcome the plenitude of life Jesus offers. This is what peace means in the Bible. *Shalom* is fullness of life. It is this really wholesome, truly fulfilling, blessing of life that is offered to all who look to the Lord of life with hope in their hearts.

Jesus will go on to say to His disciples in John's gospel: *in this world you will inevitably encounter many trials and sorrows*. He warns them that life won't always be easy and yet He is equally adamant that His disciples can and will endure, if only they trust in Him for help. He assures them: *Your endurance will win you your lives*.

It is, above all else, the assurance of God's loving acceptance that gives us peace. In turn, it is this which will see us through every obstacle imaginable.

The resurrection gospel scenes all point to the fact that nothing can stand in the way of the Risen Lord coming to offer His peace. Nothing can hinder the Risen Lord standing in the midst of His disciples to breathe His *Shalom* into the very depths of their being: not closed doors, not doubting hearts, not questioning minds, not tears of sorrow, not sentiments of distress. As Paul writes to the Romans: *Nothing, absolutely nothing can come between us and the love of God made visible to us in Christ-Jesus our Lord*.

I opened this reflection by saying that love and peace are the key words in today's gospel text. I used John Lennon's little line to make my point.

As we draw our meditation upon today's gospel passage to a close, I am reminded of what St Francis de Sales' had to say when he wrote the following words of counsel to give comfort to someone who was disturbed and longed to taste peace and love in the depth of her heart: *Be at peace, then, and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginings. (...) Truly it is a blessed thing to love on earth as we hope in heaven, and to begin that friendship here which is to come*.

Amen!