

Good Friday 2016

(Isaiah 52:13-53:12 / Hebrews 4:14-16;5:7-9 / John 18:1-19:42)

25.03.2016

Is there not something quite extraordinary about the fact that the apostle John, whose passion narrative we read on this Good Friday, referred to himself quite simply as *the disciple whom Jesus loved*? John does this in those places in his gospel account where he is seen to hold a privileged position. He speaks of himself as *the disciple whom Jesus loved* or *the beloved disciple* in chapter 13 of his gospel account, in the Last Supper scene; he does so again in the passion narrative – in the text we have just read; we also find John using the same expression in his own regard in the post-resurrection gospel stories, including that well-known post-resurrection encounter between the Risen Lord and Peter in John 21 in which *the beloved disciple* figures in the background.

There can be little doubt that all the disciples John was probably the one closest to Jesus during the years of Christ's earthly ministry.

If John, without any embarrassment, quite unashamedly, speaks of himself as *the disciple whom Jesus loved*, *the beloved disciple* or *Jesus' close friend* (as some modern translations render the phrase) he does not do this in a boastful manner. Indeed, to the contrary. Again and again, we see John manifest great humility – especially in regard to Simon Peter. On Easter Sunday morning we will listen to the account of *the other disciple* and Peter running to the tomb, with *the other disciple* (*the beloved*) arriving there first, but standing back to allow Peter the privilege of entering the tomb before him, so that Simon-Peter may witness the resurrection first.

We might ask: how was it that John was able to recognise himself to be loved with such simplicity of heart, to the extent that he was able to speak with such freedom and openness of his belovedness?

I suggest that the apostle John was able to speak of himself in this way precisely because he was not a self-regarding person. John could speak of his belovedness because his whole focus was on the one who loved him and not on himself. John's self-perception was rooted in and stemmed from what he had discovered to be the central truth the Lord called upon him to convey to his readers (those of the fourth gospel and those of his Letters): namely, the Lord's unconditional love for all His children.

I wonder (if I am honest, I would have to say I doubt) if any of us have adequate belief in this fundamental insight and really dare to apply it to our lives. Today, let us ask ourselves truthfully: do we really believe that we are loved by God unconditionally?

John saw himself as He believed the Lord regarded him: he saw himself as *God's beloved*.

Few of us situate ourselves properly in this respect. We are more inclined to look at ourselves from our own perspective, rather than to see our lives through the Lord's eyes.

I hear the call addressed to us today to be a call to dare to see ourselves as Jesus sees us when He looks down upon us from the cross. When we come to see our lives as Jesus regards them from the cross, we are led to recognise that we are loved with such deep love. We recognise that we are loved with an infinite love. It could be asked: *was there ever a love like this?*

To see ourselves as *the Lord's beloved* is actually to have an accurate self-image. Let us admit that few, if any, of us have such a self-image. We are more inclined to zoom in upon what we consider to be unlovable within ourselves and to imagine that the Lord is as easily halted by and fixated upon our blemishes as we are ourselves. He isn't! The Lord sees us all as His *beloved*. He sees in us that beauty we so often fail to recognise in ourselves.

As He prepared to enter into His passion, Christ assured all His disciples that He considered them all to be His *friends*, His close friends. This is recorded for us in chapter 15 of John's gospel. How many of the Twelve really grasped the words Jesus spoke to them then? It would appear that at the heels of the hunt only John fully comprehended the Master's words. Only John well and truly

believed himself to be loved and befriended by Jesus, to the extent that Christ wanted His disciples to grasp this. His gospel account bears witness to the fact that John knew himself to be *Christ's beloved disciple*.

I take today's reading of John's Passion narrative as an invitation to enter into John's healthy way of seeing himself and understanding his relationship with the Master to be one of *friendship love*. Such a vision of oneself and such an insight into our relationship with Jesus can and will help us at those times when we are confronted with and troubled by self-doubt, despair and affliction. And, let's be honest enough to admit that such sentiments can and do sometimes assail, disturb and pain us.

If in John 15 Jesus spoke of discipleship in terms of an experience of friendship – *belovedness* – on the cross He matched His words by His gesture of self-giving love. Jesus' gift of Himself on the cross proved the truth of His words: *There is no greater love than this: to give one's life for one's friend*. On Calvary's Hill, in the most eloquent way possible, Christ demonstrated God's desire to be our friend. When Jesus stretched out His arms upon the cross, this gesture signified His desire to embrace all humanity in friendship love; it exhibited Christ's desire to draw all people close to Himself.

In His *farewell discourse*, Jesus made it clear that He did not want His disciples to see Him as a task-master, but as one who loved them and cared for them.

Today we are called to see Jesus as One who loves us and cares for us, with tender love and compassion.

I wonder if we truly experience the Lord's presence in our lives in such an intimate way. I wonder if we really dare to believe in His words: *You are my friends*.

A gospel song sings: *What a Friend we have in Jesus*. Can we concur with those lyrics. Really? Do we honestly believe that message to be true – true for each one of us at a deeply personal level?

I wonder how we sit with Dom Eugene Boylan's book title which describes Jesus as *This Tremendous Lover*. That book title first caught my eye when I was about eleven years of age. I first spotted it shelved in a bookcase which served as the book shop in the entrance hall of Our Lady of Bethlehem Abbey, Portgelenone. I have often meditated upon what that title seeks to convey. Namely, *God loves us*. Jesus is the *Tremendous Lover* through whom God reveals Himself to us. (Boylan stole his title from the insights of the great mystics such as Saint Catherine of Siena, along with others, of course.)

Rare in our experience is the authority figure who rather than lording his power over us actually seeks to confide in us and befriend us. That, however, is how John experienced Jesus. John recognised that Jesus confided in His disciples and befriended them. As John looked up to Jesus hanging on the cross, he saw the Master reduced to an extremely humble/humiliated state. He saw the Lord of heaven and earth reduced to powerlessness. Looking to the One lifted up before his eyes, John recognised in the brokenness of Jesus, which he contemplated lovingly, the very depth of God's love for the whole of humanity made manifest. In the exchange of regard between Jesus and John at that moment love encountered love.

Evidently John never read the words of the theologian Cardinal Walter Kasper, but he was given this insight which Kasper captures so remarkably well: *Experiencing God's love in Christ means experiencing that one has been unreservedly accepted, approved and intimately loved*. Kasper goes on to claim what John taught so eloquently in his epistles: *One can and should accept oneself and one's neighbour because of this*.

Today, let us ask ourselves if we accept ourselves and see ourselves to be loved, as John did. Let us ask ourselves if we have accepted Christ's love for us. Life with our neighbours would be so much easier and so much more life-giving if only we did. Jesus' love for others would flow out through us

and we would become truly men and women of compassion: men and women who share in the passion of Christ Himself, *this Tremendous Lover*.

As we come before the cross of Jesus in the second part of today's Solemn liturgy, let us not only look to the One who was humiliated and pieced through for our faults, but let us allow ourselves to be looked upon by Him. The One who gazes upon us lovingly from the cross is our wounded, vulnerable lover. Totally disarmed, He poses no threat to us. He offers only comfort, consolation and hope.

In His light, let us dare to look at ourselves in our own naked state, not to feel humiliated or shamed by it, but rather honoured and cherished, esteemed and cared for. What Christ reveals to us from the cross is to what length God is ready to go to honour us and help us recover our lost dignity. The Suffering Servant, marred and scarred, restores in us that beauty we have allowed to become distorted and disfigured by the effects of sin.

Jesus sees us as His beloved. May we consent to be loved by Him. May we dare to see ourselves as Christ sees us. May we dare to allow ourselves to be loved.

Amen!