

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Isaiah 66:10-14 / Luke 10:1-12.17-20)
03.07.2016

Who among us does not need God's consoling grace?

Who among us does not long for peace?

The word of the Lord addressed to us this morning, through the prophet Isaiah, comes to reassure us that these graces – consolation and peace – are offered to us.

Isaiah conjures up very beautiful and deeply intimate images to speak of these graces: a warm breast on which to lay one's head, being held, dandled upon a parent's knee. The images Isaiah employs speak to us of the comfort we are called to find in the Lord. I would also dare to say that they remind us of the comfort we are called to offer to one other in the Family of God.

All of us are called to reflect the Lord's love in our dealings with each other. We are called to display something of the Lord's own care, consideration, compassion and concern for those who stand in need of comfort and consolation.

Each one of us is called to be lovingly present to others and we are also called to allow ourselves to be strengthened and sustained in our lives by the proximity and presence of brothers and sisters who reflect to us something of the Lord's closeness.

None of us can live without the experience of love: divine love and human love. In fact, the two are inseparable. Ultimately it is God Himself whom we experience – it is He who is present – in every authentic love experience of our lives.

It is from the basis of what we heard read from chapter 66 of the prophet Isaiah in our first reading that we will now go on to look at the gospel passage proposed for our meditation this Sunday.

In today's gospel passage we see how Jesus appointed seventy-two, whom He sent out in pairs, ahead of Him to all the towns and places He Himself was to visit.

Just like the seventy-two, we are all sent to go ahead of the Lord, to prepare the way before Him. In a certain sense we are all called to be precursors of Christ. But, even more than that, we are called to bring Christ to others. We are not to be just precursors to Christ, we are to be Christ-bearers. Christ renders Himself present to others through us. Likewise, He comes to us through those He sends our way.

If we truly take to heart what is said in today's gospel passage we come to appreciate that it is Christ's peace which we are called to bring to our brothers and sisters and it is His peace that they bring to us. In all our encounters it is God's *Shalom*, His well-being, that we are meant to share. In every true meeting between brothers and sisters in the faith, the Lord (who is *Himself our peace*) is present and so His peace is made available to us. It befalls us to receive the gift on offer. We can refuse to open our hearts to this gift, of course – and, unfortunately, we sometimes do.

Have you ever been held in the arms of one who loved you?

If so, then you will know what I am talking about here, for what we feel when we are held close in the embrace of one who truly loves us is deep peace of heart. The sense of well-being we experience in such moments is the fruit of God's own love which is present and at work in these grace-filled encounters.

Where love is, there God is. Where God is, there is fullness of life, a plenitude of being, a real sense of wellness.

You will understand that what I am talking about this morning is the experience of authentic

love. I introduce and underline the adjective, because increasingly what is thought of and spoken of as love, by many people today, quite often falls far short of what true love is all about.

Authentic love leads to *self-given-ness*, to coin a new word.

Any attitude that is propelled primarily from a stance of self-interest, any approach to another which sets out to take from the other for one's own gratification alone, is not true love.

There must be self-offering and genuine sharing for us to be able to say that it is true love that is at work in any relationship.

In an authentic love relationship mutual hospitality, in the strongest possible sense, will always be in evidence.

In the context of today's gospel passage, in which Jesus speaks of hospitality and peace, it is surely significant that there is a very clear reference to healing.

Is it not being suggested to us here that every experience of a true, loving, grace-filled, Christ-centred, encounter in our lives can become for us a source of healing?

I believe reflection on our experience will reveal this to be the case.

I am convinced that the experience of authentic love brings a profound healing grace to the very depths of the human heart. I am equally sure that the inverse is also true. Any sense of having been exploited, violated, taken advantage of, through inauthentic love, can only have a deeply wounding effect upon a person's life and carry with it a really negative impact.

Interestingly, in today's gospel passage, we hear Jesus speak to His disciples of the need to put in place proper self-protective measures when they meet with ill-treatment.

He said to those He sent out before Him: *If they don't make you welcome in a town, go out into its streets and wipe off the very dust that clings to your feet.*

It is for us to try to understand what this might mean for us in our own particular circumstances.

I suggest that we can hear it in this way. There can be times and occasions, when for our well-being – our spiritual and emotional health (and maybe even, to some extent, for our physical health) – we just have to withdraw from certain relationships and situations which are proving harmful for us. That may mean putting a distance between ourselves and someone who has a damaging impact or a draining effect upon our lives. To stay in some relationships would only lead to further harm and make worse what is already wounded within us. It may lead to our being robbed of our overall sanity: our mental, spiritual, emotional and physical health.

Jesus insists upon freedom over and over again in His teaching. He continually reminds us that we are called to true freedom of heart.

Devoid of freedom, our lives are not only restricted, but our very well-being is taken away from us. Freedom is the hallmark of all true love.

When we love others truly, and when we are truly loved by others, then great freedom is experienced in these relationships.

The Lord, who loved us into being, made us to be free. He longs to see each one of us enjoy the freedom for which He made us. At the core of His being, the Lord holds a profound desire to see us *serve Him in true freedom of heart.*

The first great revelation of God to His people Israel in the Exodus event makes this point.

The Israelites were set free to serve the Lord their God.

Freedom is also a key hallmark of Jesus' mission to the world. In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus made it clear, at the outset of His public ministry, that He was *sent to bring liberty to captives.*

We are all *freed to serve*.

This is something we are led to discover increasingly, each day a little more, as we journey the path of Christian discipleship. We must remember that the *Master* we follow is before all else *God's Servant*.

Jesus dared to take on the lowest rank of service when He espoused our human condition. There are implications in this for us. We are to strive to be Christlike. We are called to live as servants of the Lord and servants to each other.

The evident poverty – and the resulting vulnerability, we could say, along with the absolute trust in God's providence – which was to be displayed by the seventy-two, whom Jesus sent out before Him, should also be made manifest in our lives.

The seventy-two were not to carry purse or haversack; they were not to wear sandals. They were to be totally unencumbered. The disciples being sent out without props of any kind, so to speak, was also a strong testimony to their freedom. Of course, it must be recognised that, at the same time, it placed these disciples in a very vulnerable position. Christ sent them out unarmed, as it were. Jesus told the seventy-two clearly: *I am sending you out like lambs among wolves*.

The word of God which the seventy-two were to proclaim in Christ's name – and which it befalls us to proclaim in this day and age – is always a freeing word.

It is vital that we grasp this aspect of the Christian gospel.

I wonder if we have.

I wonder if the word of God is well and truly understood by us – and perceived by those who look to us and listen to us speak it – to be a free and freeing word.

If it isn't, then we have to own up to our part of responsibility for this.

We must ask ourselves this question: when others look at us, what do they see? Do they see free men and free women under grace? Or, do they see men and women who are greatly caught in all sorts of things – men and women who appear to be totally preoccupied, engrossed in their own affairs?

Vigilance is required of us.

We have been freed by grace; we must strive to remain free.

There is a real danger for many of us to imagine that we are going about *God's work* when really it is *our own affairs* we are engaged in.

Works for God can become our downfall. They can lead us to fail to appreciate our real mission which is to do the work of God.

There is a world of difference between the two.

We can *own* the first sort of ministry. We can make it our affair. As Christians, it isn't about *our affairs* that we are meant to be, but about *the Father's business*. The twelve year old Jesus sitting among the doctors of the Law, in the Temple of Jerusalem, had gathered this. This discovery left Jesus *free to serve* as the Father would have Him do.

Later on Jesus will say to His disciples: *Learn from me*. Jesus invites us to learn from Him how to serve, how to walk freely and lightly, harnessed to Him, engaged with Him, intent upon doing the Father's work.

When we approach whatever we are asked to do in this way, thinking of it in terms of doing the *work of God*, then we are led to serve freely and lightly.

Understand me. There is work to be done and our labour force is required. The Lord would undoubtedly have us work as harvesters, but He immediately gives us a salutary reminder that the work we are engaged in is ultimately His. From the very outset, Jesus injects a sense

that whatever is asked of us really is the Lord's affair; it is certainly not ours alone. Jesus invites us to ask *the Lord of the harvest* that others may come to help us in the great task set before us. Jesus says: *The harvest is rich, but the labourers are few, so pray the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into His harvest.*

Thus it is drawn to our attention to whom everything belongs.

While our own community's vocational need is a very real concern for us and one that we long to see in some way abated by the arrival of new brothers, we must remember that we are engaged in the Lord's service, busy about the Lord's affairs and not just caught up in our own business. This monastery is the Lord's own house; the ministry lived here is His and not ours alone. As a community, we are called to position ourselves as Jesus situated Himself: as men who seek to do only the Father's will, as men who are about our Heavenly Father's business.

That does not detract from the strong invitation addressed to us (indeed, the command given to us) to pray to the Lord that He may lead us to grow in number since *the labourers are few* here. It is clear that we must also do our part to call others to consider our way of life and come alongside us to serve the Lord in this place. I address a call to anyone listening to today's homily (or reading it later) who may be asking himself if the Lord is calling him to our way of life to listen attentively and to dare to respond if the voice of the Spirit seems to be saying: *Come*.

Let me emphasise that it is to a way of life that we are called in the monastery. *Who is he who desires life?*, St Benedict asks in the Prologue of his Rule for Monks. *Let the one who desires life come.*

What counts is the life the Lord Jesus offers to all those whom He calls. Christ came into this world so that we might have life ... so that we might live our lives to the full.

This assurance led Pope Benedict to address the following words to young people at one point in the course of his ministry as Bishop of Rome: *If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. (...) Dear young people, do not be afraid of Christ. (...) He takes nothing away and He gives you everything. Open wide the doors to Christ and you will find life.*

Life is what we all long for.

We can only find the fullness of life, we so ardently desire, if we dare to live our lives in love. If it isn't love that we have discovered and are striving to live out day after day – each one in our particular way of Christian discipleship (each one of you in your own way of life, for us monks, in our monastic life) – then whatever it is that we are living our lives are pointless. Ultimately, it is only love that gives meaning to our human existence.

Love for God is what should animate all our lives: a love for God which finds expression in love of other people.

St Augustine reminds us of the fundamental importance of the discovery of love in all our lives (and I would say that his insight here is especially applicable to consecrated men and women) when he writes the following lines: *To fall in love with God is the greatest of all romances; to seek Him is the greatest adventure, to find Him is the greatest human achievement.*

For St Benedict it is the discovery of love which is the end of our monastic lives. Benedict's whole purpose in writing his Rule for Monks was to lead those who would choose to live the gospel way guided by its teaching to that *perfect love which casts out all fear*.

Amen!