

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Wisdom 9:13-18 / Luke 14:25-33)
04.09.2016

There are some gospel words which can appear to us so harsh that we find ourselves unable to accept them – certainly we are hesitant about doing so.

In the gospel passage heard this morning we might question what we hear Jesus say when He proclaims: *If any man comes to me without hating his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple.*

Just what was Jesus thinking about when He said that? These words sound so unchristian that we may wonder how they could ever have been used by or attributed to Jesus. If love is central to Christ's message (and it is), we might ask how Jesus could ever advocate that we hate another person? It just doesn't make sense. We are all the more baffled by Jesus' words in today's gospel passage when we take into consideration all the teaching we find elsewhere in the Sacred Scriptures which speaks of honouring, respecting and loving others – not least, those closest to us. Are we not called to have a particular concern for the very categories of people Christ names in today's gospel pronouncement? The Scriptures tells us that a man must honour his father and mother, love his wife as much as he loves his own body, be kind and compassionate in regard to his children and welcome and cherish the gift of his own life. Somehow these demands to be attentive to others and loving in their regard just don't seem to tally with the call heard in today's gospel to hate father, mother, brothers, sisters, children.

A few lines from a book by the late Fr Gerry Hughes, SJ, helped me make sense of Jesus' words in today's gospel passage when I read them some years back. I share them with you this morning in the hope that they may help you make sense of what appears to be a very strange call addressed to us today. In his book *God, Where Are You?*, Hughes shares his life experience with us in a kind of spiritual autobiography which includes a long passage about his Jesuit novitiate training. He recounts: *Shortly after arriving in the noviceship we were told to study and make notes on Rodriguez' treatise 'On Charity'. It began with the text 'Unless you hate father, mother, brothers and sisters, you cannot be my disciple'. It was years later that I learned that Hebrew does not have the equivalent of our word 'prefer', so in order to say, for example, 'I prefer apples to oranges', one has to say 'I hate oranges, but like apples'. Alphonsus Rodriguez, unaware of the distinction, exhorted his readers to break free from all family ties. Hughes goes on to explain how intuitively he knew that what Rodriguez was saying did not make sense. Rodriguez' reason to insist on breaking family ties was rubbish, Hughes states – especially since the reason Rodriguez gave was that their families clung to Jesuit novices because of these novices' wealth. Hughes knew himself not to be wealthy! The key concept Fr Hughes would have us grasp is the insight he shares around the Hebrew thought process that led Jesus to speak as He did when He formulated His message in terms of hating other people. The conclusion to be drawn from Hughes' insight is that Jesus' strange call amounts to a call to *prefer nothing whatsoever to Christ!**

This leads us to think of St Benedict's insistence in his Rule for Monks – an insistence which we find formulated very clearly in two places, but which runs throughout the Rule. In the chapter entitled *The Tools of Good Works* (RB 4) and in the chapter entitled *The Good Zeal Monks Should Have* (RB 72), Benedict tells his monks to *prefer nothing whatsoever to Christ* – nothing whatsoever surely includes *none whomsoever*.

If we were to be asked to sum up Benedict's Rule in one short slogan phrase, I guess very many of us would opt for something along the lines *the love of Christ before all else*. The phrase *The love of Christ must come before everything else* really does give us insight into the core of Benedict's teaching. The saint's insistence on *the love of Christ before all else*, when

read alongside today's gospel passage, takes on an even greater significance in chapter 72 of the Rule (*The Good Zeal monks ought to foster*), for in that chapter we have a great lyrical outpouring about the love for others. Chapter 72 of the Rule really is all about love for other people; it encourages us to love others *with a most fervent love* (the greatest love possible, we might say) and then states that we must prefer the love of Christ. Surely, the point made here amounts to this: our love for others – like the whole of our life – should be truly Christ-centred. Our love for others is clearly depicted in chapter 72 of the Rule as an incarnation of what should be the fundamental love of all our lives: our love for Jesus. Our love for others is certainly not to be a distraction that pulls us away from Christ, but rather a love that leads us all the more to Jesus.

Christ-love is the centre not only of the Benedictine Rule, but of every authentic Christian life. Gospel living is all about being loving Christ. The love of Christ must be the focal point of our entire existence. Everything must lead up to it and everything should flow from it. This is what Jesus' words in today's gospel passage are reminding us of. The strength of our Christian lives, our truest well-being, our happiness, our peace, the health of all our human relationships, including our family bonds – all these things – depend upon this fundamental relationship of all our lives: our relationship with Jesus. A Christian is one who is called to live everything he or she lives *in Christ*.

It is very important to grasp that the love of Christ to which Benedict calls his monks is the same love which Jesus asks of us for Him in the gospel: it is a love which stems from Christ's love for us. The Lord's love for us always precedes our love for Him and/or for others. *He first loved us. He gave His life for us. He showed us the greatest love when He gave His life for us.* It is this first love, the love that has preceded us, which makes it possible for us to love Christ in our turn, entering into the movement of His own great self-giving love to the point of wanting to make the total gift of our being to Him and for others, following Jesus' own example.

It is the recognition of the generosity of God's love for us, revealed in Christ-Jesus, that encourages us to love Him and others, in our turn, with a generosity that seeks to be a reflection of Christ's own unbounded generosity.

God loves us to the point of folly. The folly of God's love revealed in the mystery of the cross calls forth from us a response of mad, crazy love which mirrors His own and makes us ready to give our all, out of love, in return for love.

The context in which Jesus spoke the strange words we hear Him pronounce this morning is all important. I would like to say a word about that now.

Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem. He knows what awaits Him there – if not in all the details of the story, certainly in essence. He knows that He must give Himself unreservedly for those whom He loves – and that is the whole world, without exception. Jesus knows within Himself, and reveals to us, that the ultimate truth and the final goal of every human being is total love, to live totally self-giving love.

I think the key point to be grasped in the words Jesus speaks is that to prefer Him to all else – including every person we consciously hold love for in our hearts – is, in fact, not an invitation to love others less, but an invitation to love them better, for it has us prefer Christ's love to ourselves. That little note in what Jesus says is so important. We must love Him more than our own life. Think of it. What skews our love for others most? Is it not that tendency, to which we can succumb: the tendency to put ourselves at the centre? Is it not that tendency we have to love others for our own ends, rather than to love them purely, gratuitously and

unselfishly?

The call of today's gospel is not so much a matter of seeing Jesus and others as being in competition with each other, as it is a matter of seeing everything and everyone in the one light: the light of God's love revealed in Christ-Jesus.

The place where love is revealed most eloquently is on the cross. There can be no great love, no passionate love for another, that does not include an element of Christ's own passion made manifest upon the cross. Every true love for another demands of us that we dare to die to our self so that the one we love may live more.

Perhaps the best way – certainly a helpful way – to approach today's gospel text, with its mysterious call to *hate* others, is to think of hating them in these terms: not considering them as ours, not possessing them as our personal property.

To situate oneself in regard to another person thinking that one owns that person is to be badly situated in their regard, it is not to love them with the greatest love. The greatest love is a totally unselfish love; it is not in any way possessive. Possessive love robs those we may call our loved ones of their freedom.

It seems to me that what Jesus asks of us in today's gospel passage amounts to this: to leave behind one way of relating to others in love and to take up another, better, way of loving them. What Jesus says in today's gospel passage is best understood when we take into consideration what He says in John's gospel: *There is no greater love than this, to give one's life for the loved one.*

To love Christ above all and before all others, is to love as Christ Himself loves. A little phrase found in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians was present in my thought earlier. I alluded to it when I spoke the call for husbands to love their wives. Paul states clearly that *husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the Church*. How did Christ love the Church? *Christ loved the Church by giving His life for her*. We are to love by giving our lives for our loved ones. To give one's life in this way demands a certain death to one's self. Today's gospel does not hide the call to die as a call addressed to each one of us.

We must be careful how we consider others. We speak of *my parents, my spouse, my children, my friend(s), my community...* If we are not careful this can so easily degenerate into our regarding others as our possession. The emphasis can be on our self: *my*. This is not how Jesus related to others! Jesus prayed: *Father, keep in Your love all those You have given to me. They are not mine. They are Yours.*

May the Lord who comes to nourish His life within us as we gather to celebrate His Eucharist help each one of us to enter more deeply into His own movement of self-giving love, a love that dares to give one's life, accepting the deaths to selfishness that the Christ-centred love to which we are called demands of us.

Let us make Christ's prayer our own as we think of those we love. Let us remember that all those we love belong ultimately to God. No one is to be considered as our possession – nor should any of us consider ourselves to be possessed by any other person over and above Christ. It is to Christ that we all belong.