

Vigil of Pentecost (C)

(Exodus 19:3.8.16-20 / Ezekiel 37:1-14 / Romans 8:22-27 / John 7:37-39)

14.05.2016

Who is the object of our desire? What do we long for?

This evening we hear addressed to us those words Jesus cried out in the temple: *Come to me all you who thirst.*

This invitation brings to mind words from psalm 42 in which we hear the psalmist pray: *Like the deer that longs for streams of water, so I long for you my God.*

Have we come here to this Vigil filled with a pining desire to drink the fresh water of the Spirit which Christ offers to us and to all those who thirst?

The depth of our longing and desire is so important, for we could say that God's gift to us will be at its measure. The Dominican mystic, Meister Eckhart, suggested that *the reason why we are not able to see God is the faintness of our desire.* In the same Dominican school of spirituality we hear Catherine of Siena remind us that *the extraordinary power of our desires are among the ways by which we reach and touch God.*

When we read further into psalm 42 we find the following words which are charged with deep emotion: *My heart is breaking as I remember how it used to be: I walked among the crowds of worshippers, leading a great procession to the house of God, singing for joy and giving thanks amid the sound of great celebration! Why am I discouraged (now)? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! ... I will remember You ... I hear the tumult of the raging seas as your waves and surging sweep over me. Each day the Lord pours out His unfailing love upon me, and through each night I sing His songs, praying to God who gives me life ... Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart sad? I will put my hope in God anew! I will praise Him again – my Saviour and my God!*

I suggest that we allow our attention to halt for a few moments with the thoughts expressed so poignantly by the psalmist here. In the course of this night of Vigil, these lines from psalm 42 invite us to revive our memory of the Lord's blessings: those blessings already bestowed upon us, which we may have forgotten, alongside the blessings of the present moment in our lives. The revival of this memory is what is needed to renew us in hope.

The psalmist's prayer encourages us to reconnect with the most profound longings of our heart and the deepest source of our being. When we go to that level we are led to drink at the source of the living waters of the Spirit which well up within us from that depth.

For the wellspring of Christ-life to be released within us, for His grace to flow freely through us and irrigate our whole being, we need to remove whatever may be creating a barrage in our hearts and hindering the flow of divine energy in our lives.

Psalm 42 models for us a way of prayer that permits this to happen. The psalmist's prayer shows us that it is vital for us to be able to express our deeply felt emotions, just as he expressed his. The example of his prayer here encourages us to open up our hearts to God in all honesty. Like the psalmist we must dare to articulate whatever we are feeling deep down inside. Sometimes we are loathe to do that, for we are afraid of the depths of our emotions.

As we read through psalm 42 it is worth noting and paying close attention to how the prayer unfolds. Note how the psalmist enters into dialogue with himself. In and through this

dialogue, he reconnected with his truest self, his deepest being. (Like the prodigal son, *he went into himself.*)

Reading the psalmist's words, some might conclude that he simply talks to himself in his prayer, but he does more than that. When the psalmist speaks to himself, he does so under God's inspiration. His interior discourse has him dialogue with the Living God who has made His home in his heart – just as he has made His home in each one of our hearts. So, while the psalmist's prayer is self-talk at one level, it is also more than self-talk at another. He is communicating with the God He carries within his being and whom he believes to be directing his life.

Fair enough, we hear the psalmist commanding himself to hope in God when he says: *Hope in God still!* But, this auto-command comes from beyond himself. It is the Spirit praying in him. Hope in the Lord is God's own will for him, just as it is for each one of us

In another psalm with which we are all familiar – the *Miserere* (psalm 50 in the Greek numbering, psalm 51 in the Hebrew numbering) the psalmist prays that *fresh heart be put into him, a new spirit be given to him*. A key to open us up to the *fresh heart and new spirit* asked for here is found in yet another line of psalm 42, wherein we read these words: *I will praise Him again, my Saviour and my God*. That little phrase is all the more significant given the note of quasi-desolation with which psalm 42 opens. After the pining, yearning, longing in near desperation that the psalmist voices at first, he goes on to pronounce his commitment to *praise the Lord anew*. This is clearly a real act of faith on his behalf, an eloquent testimony to the mature hope that has grown within him.

We could say that the psalmist's readiness to praise the Lord has him commit himself to dig down into the apparently arid ground of his heart until he reaches that source of living water which is buried deep down under the rocky, sandy earth.

We can well imagine that the psalmist did not feel like praising God all the time (who does?) and yet he dared to do so. Even in the dark times he traversed, the psalmist dared to sing his songs of praise extolling God's steadfast love.

I find it greatly consoling to see how he goes from sharing feelings of depression over the suffering he experiences to sharing his hope, born out of that very same suffering. He does not allow himself to become wrapped up in self-pity. In the journey he makes, it clearly isn't a straight path of progression he follows until he arrives at the goal to which he is called. This too I find consoling. The psalmist's prayer shows us that he struggled. Like him, we too can struggle, moving back and forth between extremes: one minute voicing despair, at another expressing hope. The important thing is to recognise and express what we are feeling in all honesty.

It is important *no matter what* that we hold on to God's given grace, which is confidence of heart. Even when the floods of trouble sweep over us, we should keep trusting in the Lord, hoping in Him, believing in His promise that *hope will not disappoint us, because God's love is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given to us*.

Significantly, in the course of this night of Solemn Vigil, we read that famous oracle found in the Book of Ezekiel. The prophet evokes the scene of a valley of dry bones. The point made for us here is that even in a valley of death – an old battlefield probably, which is filed with the dry, lifeless bones of those who have gone through a combat to the point of death – a valley in which there seems to be no possibility of life-recovery, God's Spirit is able to move and revive what is dead. The dry bones come to life as Ezekiel prophesies over them. The

living word of God which Ezekiel is given to pronounce gives fresh heart, new spirit; it makes the dry bones live.

In a place of extreme aridity and lifelessness, in a situation of sterility and death, God's Spirit comes to supply hope. As a result, new life emerges from the dust. We are given to see here how when God enters into the picture defeat can be overturned. The Scriptures remind us that the last enemy, death itself, will eventually be destroyed. Mortality is not the last word. New life is given beyond the grave.

The new life of the Spirit is offered to us tonight. In the great feast of Pentecost, Easter is fulfilled. The mystery of Christ's Risen Life enters into our lives. As St Paul puts it: *We are brought to new life with Christ.*

Entry into new life always implies a passage through death. Can enter into fullness of life only those who have first died. The spiritual writer Ronald Rolheiser makes a point we must not lose sight of when he states: *Resurrection is not just a question of one day rising from the dead, but it is also about daily rising from the many mini-graves within which we so often find ourselves.* For Rolheiser to write a little further on into his book *'The Passion and the Cross': To believe in the resurrection is to be comforted, comforted at a level so deep that nothing in life is ultimately a threat any longer. In the resurrection, the hand of God soothes us and the voice of God assures us, frightened children that we are, that all is good and that all will remain good forever and ever.*

As we celebrate the fulfilment of Easter in our lives through the Pentecost event, may we feel Christ's resurrection power released in our lives. May we be given a sense of the risen life of Jesus at work in the very depths of our being as we grapple with the reality of death: our own death – the many mini-deaths which Rolheiser speaks of and which are part of our daily existence – as well as those deaths with which we are confronted on every side... on a world scale and in the personal losses we are led to experience when loved ones depart this life or when once-strong relationships fall apart or fritter away.

One final word.

In John's gospel, on the cross Jesus not only gives up His spirit to the Father, He also pours it out on all flesh as blood and water flow from His open side. This free-flowing stream of blood and water is a strong image. We can see it as the fulfilment of Jesus' words spoken in the gospel passage heard tonight. It is an image that speaks to us of the new life of the Spirit which Christ offers to us. Again Ronald Rolheiser is very insightful in regard to this aspect of the gospel. He writes: *What is blood? What is water? We are alive when blood flows through us. What is water? Water does two things for us, it quenches thirst and it washes us clean. When we combine these concepts, we begin to get a sense of what the Gospel is trying to teach us here. It is telling us what Jesus' disciples experienced inside themselves in the face of His death. They felt an outpouring of blood and water; that is, a deeper and richer flow of life within themselves and a sense of being both nurtured and cleansed in a new way. They felt something flow out from Jesus' death that made them freer, less guilty, and more open to life than ever before. They felt washed, cleansed and nourished.*

Bathed in the tide that flows from Christ's open side, may we feel renewed in grace tonight.

Amen!