

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)  
(Deuteronomy 6:2-6 / Mark 12:28-34)  
04.11.2018  
*Love*

According to Jesus we are called to love God, our neighbour and ourselves. Christian love is threefold; we cannot pick one aspect and reject the other two.

St John tells us that the criterion, or the proof, of our love for God is our love for our neighbour (cf. 1Jn 4:20) and we heard in our Gospel reading that for Jesus, the measure of our love for our neighbours is our love for ourselves.

So the initial question in a Christian reflexion on love should be this: do we love ourselves?

The fact is that, in Christianity, we can give only what we have received from God, because ultimately everything we have comes from God. So for you and me there is no other way than to begin by receiving God's love for each one of us and then to share this love with others and in so doing to bear witness to the love we have for God.

It would be strange to imagine that it is possible to hate ourselves and, at the same time, to love others. Most of the time, when we are unable to relate peacefully to others, we are just projecting onto them our own difficulty to relate to ourselves. When we are at war with ourselves, we then become at war with everybody.

Without pretending to be exhaustive, let us go through a few aspects of what it means for us to love ourselves.

St Paul tells us that, in his great love, God has forgiven us (cf. Eph 4:32) and reconciled us to himself (cf. 2Co 5:18). So one way for us to love ourselves is to forgive ourselves and to be reconciled with ourselves.

The first step is to forgive ourselves for not being the one we would like to be. To be reconciled with ourselves means that we stop beating up ourselves for not being the perfect guy we think we should be. At one stage in life, we must all reach the point when we find peace with who we are, humbly embracing the limitations and the talents that are ours.

St Paul reminded the Galatians that "Christ has set us free" (5:1). Another way for us to love ourselves is to consent to be free. We have to enter into a dynamic whereby we allow ourselves to be freed from all that holds us captive. We have to give ourselves the permission to be, to think and to move on in life freely. The sad thing is that we are quick to fetter ourselves, to prevent ourselves from being freely alive. In our churches, some people live very controlled and narrow lives, guided by many self-imposed rules and regulations. This is not what love is about.

Jesus tells us that our Father knows what we need (cf. Mt 6:8). When we love we care for the needs of our loved one. Do we really care for ourselves, for what we really need? We all have physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual needs, do we really care for them? Do we really feed our minds and bodies with good and life-giving food?

Unfortunately junk-food is not only for the body. What we look at on TV or on the internet, what we read in some newspapers and magazines, on some blogs and websites is nothing more than junk-food when it is not altogether poisonous consumption. We have to acknowledge that there are a lot of so-called Christian media outlets which serve up only junk-food because they do not really give us what we need to help us grow and be fully alive.

Do we love ourselves to the point whereby we care about the way we feed ourselves physically and spiritually?

Love is about forgiveness, reconciliation, freedom, and proper care.

Today Jesus' words are clear if we want to obey God and be fully alive we must forgive our neighbours as we forgive ourselves, be reconciled with them as we are reconciled with ourselves, free them as we allow ourselves to be free and care for others as we care for ourselves.

All this is not just about pampering ourselves. Forgiveness, reconciliation, freedom and care entail truth, respect, and conversion but they require truth, respect and conversion from us not out of anger, frustration and resentment but in the context of the peaceful, humble and loving acknowledgement of who we are in God's sight.

Martin Luther King once said: "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power."

If we want to change something within ourselves, if we want to tame the wild beast in our hearts which sometimes hurts us, we must begin with love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and proper self-care.

Moreover if we desire that our brothers and sisters in humanity see the love of God for what it really is, they must discern it first of all to be at work in our personal lives. They must be able to see the first-fruits of God's love in you and me, in the way we relate to ourselves. Then this love at work within us, which comes from God, will overflow and impact on all our relationships.