

The Sacred Heart of Jesus (C)
(Ezekiel 34:11-16 / Luke 15: 3-7)
28.06.2019

Perhaps the most ancient image of the Risen Christ we possess depicts Him, we could say, living today's gospel parable. This image, painted on a wall of a Roman catacomb, shows Jesus, risen from the dead, carrying home on His back a sheep that has strayed. The sheep is shown to be slung over Christ's shoulders in a way that has its head held close to the Good Shepherd's heart. It is in the same loving manner that the Risen Christ carries you and me. He holds us close to His Sacred Heart. The deepest desire of Christ's loving heart is that we should approach Him and allow ourselves to be held close to Him. The Lord longs to see us do as *the Beloved Disciple* did: to lean our head on His breast and there to listen to His gentle, yet strong, loving heartbeat.

Have you ever heard the heartbeat of someone who held you in their loving embrace? If so, you will recall that you felt something quite extraordinary at that moment. A truly loving embrace will have been experienced as a grace and a memory to be treasured. It will have made us feel secure and trusting in regard to the one whose love was audible to us at that moment, in an unspoken manner. If any words were pronounced accompanying that holding gesture these words will have been but a gentle whisper, a quiet murmur. What peace will have reigned in the depths of our being at that moment of loving embrace. We will have felt free of all tension and so content that we will not have wanted to be anywhere else but there. Let me suggest that what is experienced in such a moment is a gift of communion... union with, oneness with, the other. Held in another's loving embrace, in that blessed moment, we will most probably have become aware of our own heartbeat. We will have heard our own heart beat and that our loved one to the point where they seemed to be synchronised and form but one heartbeat.

Today and every day we are called to recline the ear of our heart close to Jesus. We are invited to hold our hearts near to Him in peace and, in so doing, to savour the sense of well-being that stems from a symbiotic union with Christ. We could say that what we are called to realise as we celebrate today's feast is that the Lord gives us *a chest to lean on* – a place where we feel safe and secure. It is from that place – close to the heart of Jesus – that we are called to look upon the world around us and consider our place in it. It was in and from such a place of intimacy – close to God His Father, One with Him – that Jesus lived the whole of His life. Given that this is how Christ lived, we can be sure that love was at the core of Jesus' vision of the world. Likewise, love should be at the very centre of our way of looking at all things and every person we encounter. We know this from our reading of the gospels. They show us that love was at the heart of Jesus' teaching in regard to the way of discipleship. As Christian disciples we are called to be loving people. A true Christian disciple – like John, *the Beloved* – will be one who knows what it is to listen to Christ's heartbeat... and to echo it! He or she will be one who loves, knowing that they themselves are loved.

The gospels show us how Jesus was not afraid to express His love for others. He could say with freedom of heart: *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Remain in my love.* He could go on to call upon His disciples to be loving as He showed Himself to be: *Love one another as I have loved you.*

For us who claim to be Christian disciples, being loved, and being happy to love, should be our whole life programme. True Christian discipleship will begin in and follow on from the

heartbeat of Jesus. Christ's disciples will strive to accord their heartbeat to His. A traditional prayer in honour of the Sacred Heart has us plead with the Lord: *Make my heart like unto Thine.*

To know God's love for us and to believe in it is essential to the Christian experience. More than once I have referred to the striking front-door lintel of the Carmelite Monastery at Mazille (Burgundy, France) which declares, as if speaking for the monastery's inhabitants: *We have known God's love for us and come believe in it.* If only we could all make that declaration unashamedly, then our testimony might make people sit up and pay heed. It might lead them to recognise God's love for them.

Knowing God's love was and is essential to following Jesus. Having lived in Jesus' company, the disciples He had gathered around Him learned to fall in love with the God Jesus knew and revealed. They grasped that Jesus' teaching was not just theoretical knowledge dispensed, but something to be integrated at an experiential level. More than that, God's love was not something to be experienced, but someone to be in relationship with! We are called to understand afresh today that the God in whom we profess belief is a personal God in whose love and knowledge we are called to grow. The love and knowledge of God which is given to us as a grace is not a gift to be clung to and guarded jealously, but one to be shared generously with others. Our experience of the loving heart of Jesus is meant to be reflected, imitated. Like Jesus who reveals God love to us we are called to open our hearts to others – all others.

To open our hearts to others requires of us that we dare to be vulnerable in their regard. It requires that we make ourselves ready to experience what Christ Himself experienced in regard to people whom He loved. It means being prepared to be let down, disappointed, hurt, cheated upon, betrayed and even entirely rejected.

If we have hearts conformed to Christ's own heart, then we will be ready to love all people – including people who are difficult to love; people who are demanding, and even obnoxious to us; people who are devious and deceptive. We have all met such people on our life journeys. Even people such as these – I dare to say, especially people such as these – are to be included in our commitment to love *as God has loved us* and *as God loves us* as we are today... and we are, all of us, still far from perfect!

As I have already said, learning to be loved so as to be able to show love, is central to our Christian experience. Following Jesus in the way of discipleship is all about being led into a connection with His Father whom we come to see to be our Father. Jesus could speak in these terms in His post- resurrection encounter with Mary of Magdala: *I am going to My Father and to your Father, to My God and to your God.* Thereby He indicated that we are called to enjoy His own loving relationship and connection with His Father-God: a love connection which, like all true love, will set us free, to the point of liberating deep down within us an extravagant love for others; one ready to live the ultimate sacrifice, the greatest love, the gift of one's life.

The call of today's feast is for you and me to become loving people who carry a concern in our hearts for those who have distanced themselves from us – like the lost sheep of the story, the one that strayed. The call addressed to us who are invited to imitate Jesus is a call to have special consideration for all those who are in any way lost in life.

If we want to hear the heartbeat of God then we have to tune into the body of Christ. To do that we need to place a hand upon our own heartbeat – for, we are, each one of us, *a member*

of Christ. Then we should take the hand of someone we love, or, better still, the hand of one we find it harder to love. The gospels bid us to reach out to the stranger, the alien in our midst. If our hearts are like that of Jesus, then we will seek to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the foreigner, bind up the wounded hearts of those broken by life and liberate those held captive.

The heartbeat of God is to be discerned pulsing in the fullness of humanity, in the Body of Christ which is the Church and, beyond the Church, in the whole of society... as well as deep down within ourselves.

We must learn to listen to God's heartbeat with what St Benedict calls *the ear of our heart*. It is with the ear of our heart that we are called to listen to the complex and fascinating heartbeat of Christ which resounds in every person who is animated by God's own breath of life.

Amen!