

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Deuteronomy 4:1-2.6-8 / Mark 7:1-8.14-15.21-23)
29.08.2021
Heart

For Jesus, as for Isaiah before him and for all the biblical tradition, the heart is more than a physical organ or a cheesy symbol for love. It is the seat of life within us. The heart is our innermost self, it is the place of God's likeness and resemblance within us (cf. Gn 1:26-27). The heart is who we truly are in the presence of God.

The blessed memory of the divine presence in our hearts reminds us of our dignity. In fact it is the root cause of the deep longing for life and love which is to be found within all of us. The heart is the home where we belong and are accepted as we are, with our limitations and our wounds.

Unfortunately the eyes of our hearts are now so unfocused by sin that it can be difficult for us to connect with our real self, with God and with others. The desire to do so is indeed there deep in our hearts but sin leads us, as the prophet Isaiah declared, to wander far from God, to go into the land of exile, to dwell in the region of unlikeness.

While our hearts are thirsty for the fresh water of truthful and meaningful relationships we tend to satisfy ourselves with stagnant waters which disconnect us from our real self and prevent us from relating to others in a life-giving way.

Prisoners of our false self, we find ourselves on stage all the time, acting in ways that are supposed to help us to fit in society but which in fact isolate us from others.

This false self is a liar and as the psalmist says, it makes us speak and act from a double heart (cf. 12:2). The false self keeps us stuck in our wounds and pretends that we can deal with them on our own. It transports us into a world of illusion. As Thomas Merton puts it: "My false self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love – outside of reality and outside of life" (*New Seeds...*, p. 27). At its core the false self is self-centred. It promises us that happiness and fulfilment, love and life are at hand if we are focused on our individualistic agenda and interests.

Ultimately the false self is a cruel master. It is an idol which drains our energy. The list of Jesus: "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly" is quite daunting yet the fact is that none of us is exempt of one or the other of these evil things... they are in our hearts and we act upon them each time we cling to our false self, each time we choose to drink at the wrong tap in our heart which is ensnared by sin and far from God.

The good news for us is that in all our hearts there is the mark of our divine origin that God imprinted within us. It is still there and shines through the opacity of our sins. This ray of light is our hope because it helps us to find a way back to the inner chamber of our heart, to our real self.

Our first mistake would be to believe that we need to have everything cleaned up within us in order to reconnect with God who dwells within us. No, what we must aim at is a heart which knows that it is wounded and poor but wounded and poor in the presence of God, sustained and healed by his grace. So if we want to be at home in our own skin, dwell in our heart, we have to strive for honesty, truthfulness, for the humble acknowledgement of our sin and mistakes. I would dare to say that the first step towards life is to embrace who we are in truth, both the things we like and those we do not like within ourselves, our gifts and talents, our wounds and poverty. We can do that because we trust that in the presence of God, we are

bathed in the mercy and the light of his love which is able to transform, transfigure and heal everything within us.

The challenge is that this journey in truth, towards the truth of who we are, is first of all a journey of impoverishment and death. We have to consent to be “stripped off the old self with its practices and clothed with the new self” (Col 3:9-10), which is “created in the likeness of God.” (Eph 4:24)

Maybe in a more contemporary language, we could say that the death we have to live is the death of our inflated, self-confident, fearful and angry ego, so that our hearts may be made alive, real, conformed to Christ’s heart by “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” (Col 3:12)

This impoverishment is difficult because we are tempted to cling to our old and false forms of security. We prefer the prison we know to the freedom we don’t.

The national Synod of the Catholic Church in Ireland should be – must be – an opportunity for all of us to let go of our false selves, “to launch out into the deep” (Lk 5:4) of our hearts and to connect with the reality of who we are in God’s presence and with others as people of God.

On this journey of unification and inner reconciliation we are not alone, Christ is our light (cf. Jn 8:12). In his light we see light (Ps 36:9). If we look at him we will be enlightened and made able to see what is within us that prevents us from being ourselves without despair and fear of being rejected by God.

If we want a true answer to the questions: “Who is my real self? Where is my heart?”, we must stop looking at those who give false answers. The world around us and the false self within us are a fun house whose trick mirrors reflect back to us distortions of our self. We need to distance ourselves from those distorted images, secure and fascinating as they seem to be, and gaze into Christ, into his heart, so that our hearts may become like his.

As Churches and as persons we have to keep our eyes fixed on Christ so that we may become and reflect what we look at. Concretely that means that we have to pray, meditate on the Sacred Scriptures, celebrate the Sacraments, serve the poor, and care for the creation from our hearts; we have to give ourselves truly to God and, like the prodigal son, throw ourselves wholeheartedly into his arms.

God thirsts for each one of us. He will never give up on us and will never cease to ask each one of us: “O how long will your hearts be closed, will you love what is futile and seek what is false?” (Ps 4:3)