

Homily for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – 2022

The Hymn of Love.

There are many who would say that today's epistle, I Corinthians 13, is the most wonderful chapter in the whole New Testament. It certainly stands amongst the greatest pieces of literature ever written.

Many of us heard it read on the day of our wedding but, strictly speaking, it is not addressed to a couple on their wedding day. It is an eloquent and impassioned exhortation to the Church at Corinth and to Christians in general to seek the most important gift of the Holy Spirit. The gift that will help us the most in our Christian living. Of course St Paul is speaking of love.

But what, precisely is love? First it is important to make clear what Paul is NOT speaking about. Paul is NOT referring to being 'in love' (what we usually call erotic or romantic love). Neither is he referring to the love of family members which is called familial love, or parental love. Nor is he referring to the love of devoted and close friends who enjoy each others company and share many common interests. These three aspects of 'love' have their right and proper place in our lives and they are understood to a certain degree by everyone in every age because they are part of the natural order of things.

Paul is specifically referring to what he understood to be a particular gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. Indeed, it is perfectly clear that he sees it as the greatest by far of all the spiritual gifts showered on the Church by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He is referring to sacrificial love – the true hallmark of a faithful Christian.

Paul makes his point by firstly reminding his readers that the gifts of tongues, prophecy, knowledge, great faithfulness, great self sacrificial generosity to others and even the gift of the courage to face persecution and martyrdom are all NOTHING without love. Please note he does not say love is better than the gifts he mentions, he says those are nothing unless they are inspired by sacrificial love and carried out in love.

Some churches put great store on tongues and prophecy and unless one has ‘spoken in tongues’ and ‘prophesied’ one is hardly even saved according to many. But NOT according to St Paul. Other churches put a great store of on ‘knowledge.’ Do the Anglican church and the main stream protestant churches come to mind in this regard? There can be a well established ‘meritocracy’ of well educated people who hold all the reigns and positions in such churches. But knowledge without sacrificial love is nothing according to St Paul.

There are plenty who glorify faith above all else in their Christian life. They carefully keep the rules and precepts of the church and possibly pride themselves on being the ‘rock solid’ members of their church. Again, without sacrificial love, Paul says that sort of faith is worthless!! And the same goes for the charitable but loveless Christian. His or her generosity is worth nothing. Even the heroic Christian who seems to be so brave and ready to stare down disdain, persecution and even martyrdom, Paul says all of that admirable courage is nothing without a loving heart.

What then is this ‘sacrificial love’ that is given to Christians by the special gift of the Holy Spirit? Another good term for it is ‘unconditional love’ a love that always seeks the good of the other even if that means putting their good before my own. Paul describes the love that should characterise our lives as Christians so magnificently it is probably best to listen his words once again.

Here’s how William Barclay, my muse for the scriptures expresses 1Cor 13: *‘Love is patient; love is kind; love knows no envy; love does not boast; it is not inflated with its own importance; it does not behave gracelessly; it does not insist on its rights; it never flies into a temper; it does not store up the memory of any wrong it has received; it finds no pleasure in evil-doing; it rejoices in the truth; it can endure anything; it is completely trusting; it never ceases to hope; it bears everything with patient fortitude.’*

This is the Love that is a gift of the Holy Spirit and it will be and is given to all Christian people who actively and earnestly SEEK the gift of sacrificial and unconditional love in our Christian living. Its very easy to make the mistake of

thinking that a devout Christian life is for the 'holy' people, the 'good' people and the 'nice' people and unfortunately I don't really cut the mustard on those three counts.

The truth is none of us really 'cut the mustard.' We must all learn to rely more and more on God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit to help us in our weakness. There is a better way. It is the way of sacrificial love. We must learn to recognise our need of the grace of the Holy Spirit and humbly ask for this gift to be unleashed in our lives. *'I will show you a better way,'* says St Paul. It is the way of unconditional, sacrificial love. However, it has to be asked with humble sincerity because it is a gift of God to his redeemed people.

And now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine, according to the power that is at work in us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen