

They put a fresh heart into the disciples (Acts 14:21f.)

Paul and Barnabas were extraordinary travellers. Travelling by sea then was not easy. In those days long distance sailing in the Mediterranean was not normal between November and March- the sea was treacherous. Paul was shipwrecked three times (2 Cor 11:25). And on his last voyage up to Rome under military escort he was shipwrecked again (Acts 27:9ff.). Nor did he enjoy being shipwrecked; he unsuccessfully tried to prevent the last one. After his second evangelising tour his companion John Mark had had enough (Acts 15:37); he must have found Paul a hard taskmaster. Nothing could stop Paul...nothing can separate us from the love of Christ Jesus (2 Cor 5:14).

The Language of St. John's Gospel

The theme is taken up also in our Gospel reading today with the language of love. God was defined as love (1 Jn 4:1ff.). The Fourth Gospel declared that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to save it (Jn 3:16). The distinguishing feature of Christian discipleship is love (Jn 17). Like John the Evangelist Paul also thought hard about love, not just by writing a famous hymn on the subject (1 Cor 13) but by living out human and humanising relationships with passionate intensity- on the grand scale. I have become all things to all people (1 Cor 9:19ff.). "My dear friends whom I miss so much, you are my joy and my crown (Gal 4:1ff.)

The norm is always Christ. He died for all, says Paul, even the godless (Rom 5:8). "His love has been poured into our hearts". Following the example of Christ, Paul and Barnabas set up reconciled communities all over the then known world. They also came back to visit them, and to encourage them never to give up. With time communities mushroomed everywhere after them. Community depended precisely on unimpeded relationships. That meant the negation of self-preference. Just as parents are pivotal for the stability of the family, and the family undergirds community, so community undergirds society. This is the context in which each individual is supposed to flourish, with the experience of being loved into goodness. This is a new creation. The convinced acceptance of the love commandment created the love community.

The Council of Trent (1545-1563).

Five hundred years ago, when the Council of Trent was convened the then Church had to be totally renewed in all its members. The Church had been subjected to corruption, indifference and self-preference. Many of those responsible for the believing faithful had neglected them. The initial reformers, like Luther, who had tried to rectify things, unfortunately rent the seamless robe, and the result was the divided Christianity we know today. But there is presently a great desire on the part of all believers of good will to be one again. The Council of Trent encouraged holiness. Bishops should go home and reside in their dioceses and visit the priests and the parishes and religious houses and encourage them. Powerful laity should not in any way manipulate diocesan life, nor religious life, even when they contributed so

much financially to it. Very often family fortunes assured the nomination of bishops from rich and aristocratic backgrounds, and very often monastic houses were founded with the understanding that the children of the donors became superiors in such houses. It took long to work out the Canon Law that would protect Church life. But when that law became more important than the believers it was intended to support then love was often the casualty. In recent times we may well have experienced that phenomenon. Vatican Two was intended to be a new springtime. The recent popes call for continuity in its spirit. And the present pope is calling for an end to careerism, and for special attention to help the marginalised and those trapped in impossible situations out of which they cannot easily emerge.

Conclusion

It was sheer joy for the converts of Paul and Barnabas to be revisited. They were encouraged and consoled. How they must have exchanged with these men the implications of their individual conversions! How they compared life now with life before! 'Do you remember?' would have been an evocative part of the exchange. And what a story Paul and Barnabas had to tell them as well. 'We have travelled a lot. Great numbers are becoming Christians. The opposition is serious, but love is the guide to life. Selfless love is at the heart of our faith. It knows no bounds. It affects people of all languages and race, and all classes of society. The world is being transformed. Your experience is fundamental to it'.

And so the story goes on. We all make our own little contribution. One thing is ever more clear: selfless communities are basic to the furthering of all Gospel values. Exclusivity just alienates and is parasitic on good will, giving very little in return. Religious nursing homes and guesthouses, and parishes with their variety of associations, offer hope to those looking for a purposeful way of life. To be able to say thanks for the great values that have come to us from the past, the family, the school, the parish; to be open to the future, open for new friendships: "by this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples" (Jn 13:35). "It will be a love that, like Christ's love for his own, does not ask questions about worthiness, but simply gives itself in humble service" (J.Marsh, *Saint John*, Penguin Books, 1969, p.496). These words have not been found empty in Christian tradition- and they are immensely helpful when daily pressure is on us to neglect them and to follow a different compass. Just this last week John Vanier died, aged 90, a perfect exemplar of loving the seemingly loveless...those mentally ill neglected and forgotten by society for so long. Reading these texts as community at Mass we encourage each other, like Paul and Barnabas reporting back to Antioch –we could not be here without each other. A happy Sunday to us all. Amen.

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