

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME C

LOVE IS ALWAYS PATIENT AND KIND (1 COR 12,31FF.)

Today we have this marvellous reading from 1 Cor 13 on love, together with the shocking Gospel account of Jesus's fellow villagers wanting to throw him over a cliff. They initially applauded him for his gracious words and ended up wanting to destroy him. They would accept him only on their own terms.

Nazareth

Nazareth in the days of Jesus must have been a rather primitive place. At least Nathaniel in St. John's Gospel thought it was (Jn 1:46). Its population then is pure guess work. But it had a synagogue, and its watering well is still functional now. It was the place where the women met, and had some social life. The synagogue was the place where men played the principal role, separated from the women. The extended family of Jesus would have been known to all in both places. Thus his self presentation there as a prophet, and their rejection of him, was all the more poignant. They had report of his generosity in lakeside Capernaum, so why not a similar largesse here in Nazareth? Ironically they were making sure that no good could come from Nazareth. Charity did not begin at home. Nor do we ever hear again of Nazareth as the seed ground of Christianity. It was simply forgotten until after the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century. Jesus' contemporaries did nothing much to secure a good reputation for their mainly agricultural village. They had tried to destroy their most famous son. The comparison with Jeremiah became obvious.

The Reaction of Jesus

The passion of Jesus began early in his life. After his death St. Paul, who was 'jealous for the Law', inflicted this passion on Christians who did not follow traditional Judaism (Phil 2:6). But once converted he wrote the marvellous hymn of love in First Corinthians. Jesus was his model in formulating it. Jesus did not condemn Nazareth. He did not win followers by going around vilifying all opposition. He went about doing good and healing all.... (Acts 10: 38). He could be judged by his own standards which he set forth in the Sermon on the Mount. You pray for your enemies. You accept humiliation. You turn the other cheek. Because so many Christians honoured this, and found their peace in doing so, these exhortations begot no illusions. The conduct of Jesus was fundamental for the truth he proclaimed. But he never expected that people should be irresponsible. Rather, 'You must be as wily as a serpent and as innocent as a dove' (Mt 10:16). Faith and reason were not foreign to Jesus' way of thinking and acting.

Then why did people disagree with him so profoundly, and try to kill him?

A Hymn to Love

St. Paul can help us to understand this. To love is to give yourself away, the way that Jesus did. His life was described as a life lived for others, the man for others. Who are these others? That is not easily answered. We seem to make it easy if we work in a very small and exclusive circle. But what

St. Paul writes, and what Jesus asks for, comes under the rubric of the love commandment. It is universal. Nor is love of others consistent with letting them destroy others. Faith and reason are involved here. We can appreciate how Jesus came to propose the parable of the Good Samaritan as a moral guide. The attitudes in the parable involve consideration both of the individual and of the community. Love that is patient and kind implies persons living in community. To make this kind of love continuously real a community assent is necessary. The common good should elicit a common assent. The police or an ambulance may, for good reasons, break the speed limit, but it would be may-hem if everyone else felt free to do so. Love is not just about the good of individuals. Love is also about community and society. We are now experiencing anew what is called populism. It has led to disastrous wars in the most recent past. The immigrant crisis in the whole world illustrates the best and the worst in human nature. Building walls and controlling borders seems to be a major political concern in our time. We are less encouraged by evidence of the political will to share the problems equably and make for peaceful solutions. We are overwhelmed by statistics, the fear of losing livelihoods, scant publicity given to the very generous people in health and education and social commitments who take care of the poor- and find a way to share our world with our fellow human beings.

Conclusion

Was Jesus was brought up in a loving family in Nazareth? As soon as he went public about the nature of his mission the good relationships that he experienced in his village turned to deadly hatred. Was it jealousy and exclusiveness there that would have ruined everything? A lot of hard thinking and good experience was involved before people saw that Jesus was right. Jesus gave his life even for those who thought he was wrong. In Paul's words: "Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes".

Paul was in no doubt about what was right. He was also adamant that the way Our Lord dealt with adversity should be the way the Christian community does. The prophetic community does not cease to say what is true, but it tries to find a way of living with reality when that truth is not heard. Like the prophet Jeremiah, when all was lost, as he said it would be, he spoke for God: I have loved you with an everlasting love (Jr 31:31ff.). We cannot make people good by an act of parliament but the field is not lost when an act of parliament is not about what is good. The Church knows that very well. Love covers that too. At the moment we are faced with it every day. Amen.

Rev Richard J. Taylor
Spiritual Advisor, MaterCare International
Boarbank Hall, Cumbria, UK