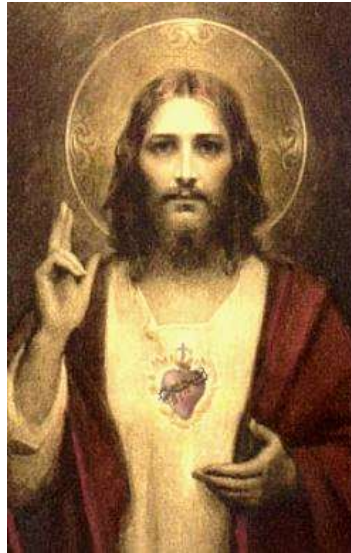


FEAST OF THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS



GOSPEL. Matthew Ch 11: 25-30

Jesus exclaimed, 'I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children. Yes Father, for that is what it pleased you to do. Everything has been entrusted to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father just as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me all you who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Today is the patronal feast of this parish - the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This image, of the exposed heart of Jesus is one of the most powerful symbols of Christ's love for us, a suffering heart, burning with love for us.

To expose His heart to us is an invitation from Christ to imitate some of the qualities of that heart and in today's Gospel Christ cites two of His own personal qualities as the sure foundation for the enrichment and peace of our souls; Gentleness and Humility.

He is quite pointed about it, "Learn from me", he advises and not only learn but imitate, shoulder my yoke and take these same qualities upon yourself.

Now, to imitate qualities or virtues like gentleness and humility, we first of all have properly to understand and appreciate it, for it is only when we find something attractive, when we can love it, that we want to include it as part of our lives.

So, let us take a look at Gentleness and Humility.

Misunderstood, gentleness and humility can be seen as signs of weakness. We live in a world that puts great store upon self-confidence and self-assertiveness.

Mistrusting other people and their intentions and motives, we leave nothing to chance - so we try to gain the initiative; we dominate and then, from a position of strength, we ourselves try to control and manipulate the position to our own advantage and sometimes to what we see to be the advantage of the other person as well.

Power and strength are not always used for selfish motives; they are sometimes used for the good of the other person as well - they can be exercised creatively.

But generally, its true to say that if you choose to live your life by the philosophy that 'might is right', and 'strength is everything', then there is price that you pay - you lose your peace of soul.

Living life that way, you can never let your defences drop, Cynical of others and deeply suspicious of their motives, you develop a habit of life where it is almost impossible to take a risk and trust.

Your strength may well protect you from being hurt but at the same time it prevents you from being truly loved because nobody gets to know the real you. And so, what on the surface appears to be strength, is not real strength at all. It is simply a reflection of your own insecurities and vulnerability and so you misunderstand what gentleness and humility are all about.

We are heavy laden and overburdened with our own false standards and ideals.

Correctly understood, gentleness and humility are rooted in strength and are an expression of strength. It is only the person who is very secure in themselves and who they are who can risk showing gentleness and humility.

If you think about it, most of us are naturally and spontaneously gentle with babies, children, those who are sick and those who are elderly --- persons who offer no threat to us. There is no risk involved, no risk of being exploited or rejected, no risk of being considered stupid or hurt.

But to be **gentle** with someone **outside** of those categories is quite another thing altogether. An act of gentleness has a profound meaning.

If someone is gentle with you, the gentleness is pleasing and soothing - and not only that, it is a signal that properly says many things, - 'I trust you', 'I care about you', 'I like you' or even 'I love you'. And the humble person is always a gentle person and a person who can be gentle is not without humility either.

But from that inner strength and security, which is the foundation of gentleness, comes a peace which the soul emanates. Life itself and other people are not considered inevitable threats because your personal values are elsewhere, and you do not have to spend most of your life within some sort of siege mentality. By taking down some of the defences, you not only allow yourself to express love - you open yourself to receive love in return.

So far I have been speaking about gentleness and humility as natural and desirable virtues in any civilised person but, as found in the person of Christ, they are more than that - they have a deeper theological meaning and it is that which Christ wants us to learn and imitate.

Consider God: in Himself He must contain the most staggering combination and balance between strength and gentleness.

Compare the unimaginable, mind blowing, power and strength that underlies the whole act of Creation. Countless galaxies, planets, suns and stars moving at inconceivable speeds through the infinite distances of empty space, away from that one primeval explosion which marked the beginning of Time.

The all-powerful Creator, whose will started and sustains all those activities in being, is at the same time the gentle Creator who delicately designs the intricacy of the snowflake and the wonder of microscopic and sub-atomic life.

And out of that enormous inconceivable power and strength we have the same God deigning to become Man, emptying Himself of His divinity and putting on the fragile and vulnerable robe of humanity. To risk and endure want, need, pain and torture, even the barbaric death on the Cross.

In the person of Christ, God-made-man, the gentleness that flows from God's strength was expressed as humility; Christ humbling himself even unto death.

And yet, still within the humble and gentle Christ, there existed strength - even the winds and seas obeyed Him ; he raised people from the dead.

By Christ's standards, strength is made manifest in weakness, in a certain voluntary powerlessness. He even chooses the weak to confound the wise and the strong - and He says it quite clearly to all of us who would follow Him; "learn from me and imitate me, be gentle and humble of heart".

Now, why would Christ, who possessed infinite power, give higher value to gentleness and humility instead?

The answer is simple - the price that you pay to be powerful and the price others must pay as a result of your power, just is not worth it. The whole package deal in getting power, exercising it and keeping it - at whatever level, inevitably results in this terrible loss of soul. We overburden ourselves with a weight that we need not carry.

Now the hard lesson that we are very slow and unwilling to learn is that if we really take our faith seriously, if we try to live like Christ, then there is an enormous risk involved for it can quite literally mean turning one's whole world upside down and living by standards and values that the world despises and rejects.

Gentleness and humility are not self-assertiveness, a desperate clinging to life itself and certain worldly values - the Christian is the one who is prepared to lay down his life for his fellow man.

If you really believe; if your strength is rooted in Christ, then you can never lose. Everything is gain.

How many of us have lost that quality of strength that enabled the Church's early martyrs to face, with gentleness and humility, the brutal and uncomprehending power which was to cruelly take their life away.

There have always been Christians, down through the centuries, who have courageously borne witness to Christian values just as there have been Christians and even the Church itself, who have not. Putting power and strength over gentleness and humility, often with the best intentions - is not the way of Christ.

In recent years the Church has been rediscovering the basis of that real strength by focusing her manpower and her resources and her voice with the poor and oppressed, against worldly power and injustice. And if you read your Catholic papers each week you will be appalled at the savage and brutal cost that some people have to pay for this, even the loss of their lives.

To really live and believe in Christian values is to experience liberation. It is to be free from some of the burdens which we mistakenly place upon ourselves to establish our security. Christ's followers can risk being humble and gentle only because they are firmly rooted in the power and strength of Christ himself and it is His promise to us that therein we can only find peace for our souls.