

Homily for the Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time 2021 Year B

Last Friday we celebrated the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the patronal feast of our parish. That image of the exposed heart of Jesus is one of the most powerful symbols of Christ's, a suffering heart, burning with love for us. To expose His heart to us in such a way is an invitation from Christ to imitate some of the great qualities of that heart. What would these qualities be?

In Matthew Chapter 11:25-30 Christ explicitly invites us to "learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls".

He is quite pointed about it, "learn from me". He advises us to not only to learn but to imitate Him as well. Shoulder my yoke and take these same qualities upon yourself as a sure foundation for the enrichment and peace of your souls.

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

So let us look at Gentleness and Humility.

Gentleness and Humility, if misunderstood, 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 try to control and manipulate the situation 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 the good of the other person as well - they can be exercised creatively.

But generally, it's 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 a price that you pay - you lose the 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 vulnerabilities. And so, you misunderstand what gentleness and humility are all about.

We are heavily 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 being hurt.

But to be gentle with somebody 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 sole 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 - but you also 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 all moving at inconceivable speeds through the infinite distance of empty space, away from that one primaeval 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 subatomic 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, torture, and 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 will 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, is just 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 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 lives 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 to 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 this is His promise to us that therein we can only find peace for our souls.