

Homily for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time 2022 Year C

The Gospel last Sunday showed us an unfamiliar picture of God, a harsh God who could destroy both body and soul in hell. It showed us the importance of trying to preserve a balanced image of the multifaceted God revealed to us in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and not to edit out of our image of God aspects that were not congenial to our own personal spirituality.

In other words, let God be the fullness of what He is in our lives.

And now, in today's Gospel, we have this very stern, unbending and almost neurotic image of Christ, who says "Anyone who prefers their mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter, wife or husband to me is not worthy of me".

Well, in its literal meaning, that should certainly give us pause for thought.

How many of us, hand on heart, can say that the person of Christ fills the horizon of their concerns and affections more than say, their newborn baby, or their fiancé, or their wife or husband? Practically no one, and yet, according to Christ's words, therefore we are not worthy of Him.

Some might say to that, "So what"? Surely I am not expected to pretend to love somebody less just to satisfy the insecurities of this Christ figure?

Other individuals or Christian sects go to the opposite extreme and ruthlessly cut themselves off from all human ties and affection, preferring, as Saint Paul says, "nothing to the love of Christ". In this blind fanaticism, done in all sincerity to give honour and glory to God, they break the hearts of those who love them and care about them. They can do nothing but standby in frustration and impotence as their love is rejected and they are categorised as enemies, obstacles to the love of God.

And if you think that sounds a bit extreme it is only in very recent times within our own Church that religious orders have humanised some of the rules and regulations governing the contact that monks or nuns can have with their own families.

I am absolutely certain that Christ never meant those sorts of things to happen in His name. So much nonsense masquerading under the mantle of religion.

One of the words that we use to describe God is perfection. God is perfect, God is love, God is perfect love, totally self-contained and totally self-satisfying. There is and cannot be any weakness, want or need in God.

So to arrive at a position where Christ, the second person of the Trinity, seems to be neurotically jealous and insecure about one creature's love for another is an absurdity.

God does not need my love.

People reading today's Gospel should not go away afraid and guilty that they love others more than they love God.

They should not be made to feel inhibited about loving others lest they are giving offence to God.

The answer lies in the diverse meaning that we give to this single word "love".

We do not love God in the same way as we love our fellow men.

Even the quality and content of the word love that we apply to each other differs enormously in its meaning. The love between husband and wife is not the same as the love between friends; the love between parents and children is not the same as between brother and sister. And so on.

The single word "love" that we use so unconsciously and freely has obviously many complex layers of meaning.

Now, if you reflect upon it, you might see that the love we give to God is not the same sort of love that we give to other created things.

How do you love that which is pure spirit, that you have no direct experience of, that you cannot see, touch, taste, or smell?

The wonderful profound and emotional response that we call love, and which we give to created things is because we have a direct experience with them. They are right there in front of us and something about them that we can see, hear or touch makes us love them.

Thus, the love that a mother feels for her child, or a husband for his wife may in fact be much stronger, more real than the love they feel for God.

And that, in terms of today's Gospel, should not be a source of guilt or fear.

That is the way that things are.

The intensity of our love for God is diluted by the fact that we do not have a direct experience of Him. We have an indirect experience of Him through such things as the

beauty of nature, and that can move the heart to love Him, but in most cases it does not have the emotional depth of a love between mother and child, for example.

It is a love of totally different quality, and all comparisons are pointless.

Indeed, if it is true that we do not have an immediate experience of God this side of eternity, then when we do experience an emotional love for God, it is not God himself that we are loving, rather our own idea, image or understanding of God.

Maybe that is why, in His wisdom, Christ tells us in the Gospels, "If you love me, keep my commandments".

The essence of the love of God does not consist of strong emotional feelings towards Him: they come, and they go, but rather in a practical programme of action that embodies and expresses that love.

Loving our fellow men does not rival or diminish our love for God. It is rather a condition of it.

Christ himself says in the Gospels, "How can you claim to love the God that you cannot see, if you fail to love your neighbour whom you can see"?

So what does Christ then mean in today's Gospel? That if you prefer another to Him, then we are not worthy of Him.

I think it means this.

If we prefer something it means that we have made a considered choice and a judgement. Having weighed everything up, we choose this rather than that. We prefer this to that.

Christ is perhaps saying that if you prefer any of God's creatures to God himself, then your whole understanding and judgement about God is wrong and you should look at it again. God is not in competition with His creatures for our love and attention. Loving them is the condition of loving Him.

The very love with which we love others is part of the very nature of God himself if God is love. God is never then excluded from any act of loving. Indeed, He is the very basis of it. But our loving is always incredibly enriched if we understand and not exclude God from it.