

23rd Sunday in O.T. 2020

In the first book of the Bible we are told that Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel, and how Cain, in a fit of jealousy, murdered his brother. When God asked Cain, “*Where is your brother Abel?*”, he replied, “*I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?*” That question, “Am I my brother's keeper?”, lies behind the scripture readings of this Sunday's Mass.

A story, from tradition, tells us that the Gospel author, St. John the Evangelist, as old man, was exiled to one of the Greek islands. Because he was an apostle, Christian pilgrims would come to visit him and ask him to speak to them about Jesus. But the old apostle would just repeat over and over: “*Little children, love one another.*” Was this merely the sentimental mumbling of an old man? It may appear so, particularly in today's world, with its strong emphasis on individualism. While loving one's neighbour may still be considered an ideal, in practice, society frequently indicates that “I am not my brother's keeper!” Such an attitude allows society to close its eyes, for example, to the plight of migrants, the unemployed, the less fortunate.

Christianity is a direct challenge to this mentality. St. John's words, “*Little children, love one another*”, are a summary of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We find this same sentiment in today's readings. St Paul, writing to the Romans, speaks of; “*mutual love... (loving) your neighbour as yourself..... (love) as the answer to every one of the commandments.*” Everything Paul has to say about the “*life of love*” is movingly summarised in his First letter to the Corinthians: “*Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offence, and it is not resentful. 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.*”

Loving one another is not merely fulfilling an obligation or the keeping of a commandment; it is much more than that. It is deliberately choosing to walk in the footsteps of Jesus himself, allowing his life to influence our lives. We who dare to call ourselves “Christians”, other Christs, must be who we claim to be. The love of which scripture speaks is not a “woolly” sentimental feeling but a deliberate decision to see each person as Jesus sees them; it is accepting the responsibility to be my brother's keeper.

Would that it be said in our time, as was said in times gone by, “*see these Christians how they love one another.*”

Both the first reading, from the prophet Ezekiel, and the Gospel passage, of today's Mass, remind us that we also have a responsibility for one another's salvation. We are “*to win back*” the person who errs, and be reconciled with those who wrong us. Calling ourselves “Christian” lays upon each of us the care of souls! In the face of “wrong doing” it has become popular to quote Pope Francis' “Who am I to judge?” while misunderstanding or overlooking the context in which these words were spoken. They were spoken of the person of good will who seeks the Lord – forgiveness isn't “papering-over-the-cracks”, pretending that everything is all right; reconciliation doesn't mean that no matter whatever happens it is of no real consequence. We cannot simply sweep wrong-doing under the carpet and pretend that it hasn't happened, or worse still, that truth is whatever an individual decides for himself or herself.

How then are we to handle serious problems when they occur in our family, in our place of work, within our church community? This is a hard question and fraught with the grave danger of making a difficult situation worse. Jesus, in today's Gospel passage, outlines a practical procedure suitable for the culture of his day. Such a procedure may not be suitable in today's society, but it is not the procedure itself that is important, but the thinking and spirituality that lies behind it. Jesus makes clear that if we do not sensitively seek to correct an erring person, we have not understood the true meaning of love, and are failing in love, both to the individual, and to the community.

The duty to care for one another has nothing to do with the fanatical righting of wrongs, still less with the deadly habit of prying into the faults of others. St Augustine said of the self-righteous, “*the less attentive they are to their own sins, the more they pry into those of others*”! The desire to win back an erring person, rather than to condemn, is the Christian motivation. A great saint once said, “the Church prefers the medicine of mercy”, and that medicine is persuasion rather than condemnation.

Perhaps in many situations we may feel that there is nothing we can say or do to correct a wrong. But let us be resolved in this; by our lives to witness to the truth and the beauty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We do

this by our patience and kindness towards all; by never being jealous of one another; never boastful or conceited, or rude or selfish; not taking offence, not being resentful, not being judgemental; taking no pleasure in another's faults and failures and misfortunes. Let the Christian example of our lives be a loving challenge to all who err!

*Lord, you have called me to share your name;
through me you want to reach out and touch others,
to persuade them that they are infinitely loved;
open the gates of my heart
and let me breathe out your love upon all. Amen.*