

Sunday Homily

5th SUNDAY OF EASTER

15 MAY 2022

YEAR C

“I give you a new commandment,
that you love one another.”

John 13:34

Illustration

It occurred in a small village in France in 1943. The village was occupied, but the local people felt sorry for the enemy soldiers. They were young men, far from home, on short rations, so each day the parish priest would go from door to door with two large baskets begging food for them. Local produce would emerge, a few eggs, some bread and vegetables. Then one day the local resistance movement blew up a strategic bridge. The commander of the occupying forces demanded reprisals and ordered that every man in the village between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five be taken to the village square. There, in front of wives, mothers and girlfriends, they were shot.

The distraught and angry villagers turned on the priest: “If you come again asking for food for these murderers we shall kill you.” On the day of the funeral the little church was overflowing, every family had lost someone. The old priest stood up and read from the Gospel of John, the passage we heard today. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.” Later that day he stood in the village square, with tears in his eyes, watching the local people filling the baskets he had placed at his feet with food to feed the enemy soldiers.

Gospel Teaching

This most simple-sounding commandment is probably the most difficult to carry out. It is easy to give it notional assent. It is fairly easy to recognise the wisdom of it. However, it requires a great deal of courage to put it into practice, and it cost Christ his life.

He died because he continued to remain true to this fundamental precept, to love every human being, regardless of their response to him. He was hated and treated unjustly by his enemies and yet he still loved them. Not in an emotional, sentimental way, but by understanding them and absorbing the fear which made them react against him; by concern for their well-being in spite of their actions; by recognising the basic humanity of each one which makes them precious in God’s eyes.

This is the vocation of the Christian. The early Church accepted all who came in spite of their past, their disabilities, their faults. The enthusiasm of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles speaks of the generosity of those followers who dedicated their lives to spreading this universal message of love and forgiveness.

Jesus did not say it would be easy. He simply stated the necessity for this radical new departure in human behaviour, because it is the only way in which the world can reflect the kingdom of God. Whether or not we personally, or collectively, succeed or fail to change the world, it is in the struggle to love that we draw closest to Jesus and, together with him, we may affect our world more than we think possible.

Application

When we think of the forgiveness and generosity of the villagers in the story, perhaps we may feel we could never match such an action. If we had seen a loved one murdered we might think that it is impossible to forgive. However, it is important to remember that this kind of love and forgiveness does not come naturally to most people. It is a gift from God. These villagers managed to make a superhuman effort after attending Mass and hearing the Gospel proclaimed.

Paying close attention to the word of God can have remarkable results. The ability to love without self-regard is a very radical call. But it is made possible by the gift of supernatural grace from God. Our present society would often have us believe that it is easy to love. But that is a different brand of love from Jesus'. To love like him is to surrender the needs and desires of the self to ensure that those of others are met, regardless of whether or not they are deemed "worthy". Knowing all the time that we too are precious to God, in spite of our own failings, is to know that we are a gift worth giving. This is the challenge of today's Gospel, both simple and profound. It is as fresh a call as it was when it came from the lips of Jesus: "Love one another... just as I have loved you." And he walks alongside us as we do his will.