

Homily: The Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, 19th June 2020

I imagine that most of us participating in the Mass this morning are familiar with the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. There was a time – not that long ago – when no Catholic home would have been without this image on display. It shows the Lord pointing to His Heart, which is visible in the image. Over His Heart is the cross, and the Heart itself is surrounded by the crown of thorns which was placed on His head at His crucifixion. And around all this is fire – a sign that the Lord’s love burns strongly for each one of us. Here we see the intensity of the love which Jesus has for each of us; in the instruments of the Passion we see how Jesus most clearly showed His love: by His death on the cross. We see something of the nature of love, which is not just sentimentality or intense feelings, but a desire and a willingness to give oneself to the other. This is what Jesus has done: given Himself for us on the cross, and, as we celebrated last Sunday, given Himself to us in the Eucharist.

This is not just a gift to the whole world: it is a gift to each of us personally. In today’s first reading, Moses today tells the people that the Lord “set His Heart” on them and chose them. The Lord’s love is not cold and distant, but love which burns for those on whom He has set His Heart. And that includes us: it includes you and me. The Lord has set His Heart on each of us and He desires only our love in return.

Twice in today’s second reading St John tells us that God is love. It’s not just something He does, but His very being. And out of love, God who was unknown and unknowable to humans chose to reveal Himself. He made Himself known, so that we might love Him and know that we are loved by Him. And He wanted us to know this so strongly that He gave His love a human Heart, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, so that His love might be visible to us.

In most cultures the heart is a symbol of love, presumably because our hearts can beat faster or apparently ‘skip a beat’ when we are drawn to another in love. Our hearts seem to give us a physical manifestation of the love we feel, love which in itself is not visible. And, of course, our hearts perform another very important function: they provide our bodies with everything we need to keep us alive. Only because our hearts keep beating, day and night, do our cells get the oxygen they need to stay alive, the nutrients they need to grow and repair damage. Everything the different parts of our bodies need depends on the heart doing its job. If the heart stops beating, everything else fails.

The great Carmelite saint Thérèse of Lisieux is one of the Church’s greatest teachers on love. In a famous passage, when she speaks about her own vocation to love, she shares this insight: “I knew that the Church had a heart and that such a heart appeared to be aflame with love. I knew that one love drove the members of the Church to action, that if this love were extinguished, the apostles would have proclaimed the Gospel no longer, the martyrs would have shed their blood no more. I saw and realised that love sets off the bounds of all vocations, that love is everything, that this same love embraces every time and every place. In one word, that love is everlasting.” Like a heart that beats to make sure the body has everything it needs, love drives all the activity of the Church: Apostles, martyrs, preachers,

those who perform acts of service great and small – none of happens if there is no love. Without love these gifts would be lost, and the Church would quickly die.

St Thérèse makes this point about the gifts we offer to God, but the same is also true for the gifts God offers to us. Without love, He would not desire to sustain us in being, to reveal Himself to us, to give Himself to us, to be with us, to show us mercy, to offer us salvation, to call us to eternal life. It's only because He has a Heart, and a Heart burning with love, that He offers us any of these beautiful gifts. His Heart, beating with love for us, provides us with every gift that we need.

Sometimes we are conscious of the Heart of Jesus beating with love for us. Something happens which reveals to us His love: a moment in prayer, an act of kindness from another, an experience of beauty, relief from suffering. These are beautiful moments, but they come and go. Most of the time God's love is less obvious to us – or we are forgetful of it. The same is true of my heart: now and again, I feel it beat, I am conscious of my pulse; but mostly, I don't notice it. Day and night my heart beats, whether I am awake or asleep, keeping me alive and giving me everything my body needs. And this is true of the Heart of Jesus too. Day and night, whether we are awake or asleep, His Heart beats with love for us, giving us life and grace. Sometimes we are conscious of it, mostly we are not; but it never stops beating. Ever.

In today's Gospel Jesus describes Himself as "gentle and humble in heart". "Come to me," He says, "all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest." I imagine there are few of us at the moment who don't feel at least a little weary with the situation we live with at present. "Come to me", Jesus says. Come and find rest here, come and experience the love of a heart that is humble and gentle. The love of God is so humble, so gentle, that He chose to give Himself a human Heart, so that we might know more deeply the depths of His love for us. There is a Heart burning with love for me, for you: the Heart of Jesus, the fount of heavenly gifts, a Heart beating for eternity with perfect love.

Fr Andrew

