

Homily: Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C) 2022

Today's Gospel picks up exactly where we left off last Sunday – in fact, it even overlaps. We hear today that Jesus told the people, “This text is being fulfilled today, even as you listen” – the same words we heard at the end of last week's Gospel. It must be an important phrase, because we hear it twice! God's message of love is being fulfilled as the people listen. God's promise to be with people and to bring salvation is already being worked out, right before their eyes. At first, it seems wonderful, but then they realise that they don't like everything Jesus has to say. Israel has always been God's people, chosen and special in His sight, and that remains true. But Jesus now tells them that He will also bring the good news to the pagans, the Gentiles, and they are furious. Perhaps they are jealous, because God reveals His love for other peoples too. But, as St Paul teaches today, love is never jealous. It's a lack of love that leads the people to turn away from Jesus. At the start of His teaching, they are enthralled; by the end, they want to kill Him. And so we see His whole ministry mapped out for us: early on, He is welcomed and acclaimed as a great teacher and miracle worker. But people will turn against Him, and they will put Him to death. His love will be rejected, but will never fail: in fact, His love will cost Him His life.

Today we hear one of the most famous passages in the New Testament, St Paul's teaching on love: “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 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. Love does not come to an end.”

What St Paul so beautifully puts into words, Christ puts into action before us. Love is always patient and kind: what greater kindness, or patience, could we ever know, than God coming to us and patiently suffering with us and for us? Love is never boastful or conceited: who is less conceited than Christ, who was humble enough to come to earth, to wash our feet, to die on the cross for us? Love is never rude or selfish, and does not take offence: faced with our sins, with mockery, with the crown of thorns, the Lord takes no offence; He does not retaliate with insults or retreat into selfishness. Instead, He accepts all the insults and continues to pour out His love for us. Love is not resentful: Christ does not resent our unfaithfulness, but patiently calls us back to Him. Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins: Jesus certainly takes no pleasure in our sins, nor does He take part in them; instead, He patiently waits for our conversion and He suffers so that our sins might be forgiven. Love delights in the truth: Christ tells us that He came to bear witness to the truth, the truth of God's love for us. He delights in that truth, and calls us to share in His joy. And think of the words of Jesus on the cross; hear His love spoken to us. Love is always ready to excuse, Paul says; and Jesus shows this: “Father, forgive them – they know not what they do”; Love is always ready to trust: “Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit”; it is always ready to hope: “This day, you will be with me in paradise”; it is always ready to endure whatever comes, as the Lord endured everything for our sake. And love does not come to an end. That's why the perfect love of Jesus on the cross was not the end of Him, but led to His resurrection. Love is stronger than death.

“This text is being fulfilled today, even as you listen.” St Paul’s text on love is being fulfilled in each moment by the love which God pours out for us. All scripture reveals the love of God to us, and that message is fulfilled when it is no longer only words, but perfectly lived by Jesus. When He gave Himself for us on the cross, He fulfilled that message of love – literally, He filled it full of meaning; He revealed how deep it really is. Jesus shows us that real love often comes at a cost, and is proved when we sacrifice, we give of ourselves, for others and for God. So there’s an obvious response to this message: to give of ourselves out of love. But I’d like to suggest something else that we might do in response to these readings. My suggestion is this: let’s also recognise how much love we ourselves have received. When I think about my life, I can list many people who have made sacrifices out of love for me: my parents, my sisters and my brother, other family members, friends, teachers, priests I have known, parishioners, and occasionally strangers who gave time to help me in some way. The list could go on. It would be lovely if, in response to these readings, we could also think of those who have made sacrifices for us and thank God for that love which we have received. Your list may be very long or quite short, but everyone has someone who has shown them love. And when you make your list, don’t forget the One who is there on the list of every human being: Jesus, whose total sacrifice, made in perfect love, has gained our salvation.

Fr Andrew

