16 Homily for the Seventh Sunday of the Ordinary Time Year A

19 February 2017

Lev 19:1-2, 17-18; 1 Cor 3:16-23; Mt 5:38-48

Last week, the day before Sean McKeowen’s birthday I was visiting the L’Arche community at Pirie Street and was having a meal with them. After the meal we all gathered together in the prayer room for the evening prayers. One of the prayers said there began with these words: “Love one another and you will be happy.” It hit me immediately: “Wow! What a thought! Isn’t this really true?” This is what Jesus is telling us. Love one another as I have loved you and life is yours. Happiness and joy spring forth from loving, not loving the way we want but loving as Jesus has asked us to love. So Jesus specifies it. Therefore, it is never the other way round: “Because I am happy, I am going to love others.” It doesn’t quiet work that way.

Dear Friends, loving one another is the hallmark and the paradigm for us Christians. That is why we sing: “Yes! They know we are Christians by our love.” A Christian should be a love machine always dispensing nothing else but love. Let us therefore ask what does Christ actually means by loving another. It embraces everyone, especially the people who have caused so many wounds and tarnished our names, the people who continue to hurt us and annoy us, the people whose ideologies are different from ours, the people who throw their weight around, the people who are not easy to get on with and people who are outside our closed circles. Loving each of them is our litmus test as Christians. This is certainly an uphill task. Things even get tougher in the Gospel. Yes! It sounds like going beyond what one might think humanly reasonable and achievable when Christ asks us to be holy and as perfect as the heavenly Father. We are to go beyond that human logic, and when we transcend what is humanly reasonable, we get to what is divine, that holiness and that perfection Jesus is talking about. To be holy and to be perfect as the heavenly Father is holy and perfect.

So we have this struggle of loving one another as Christ has loved us, and at the other end we have the perfection of the Father to which we are supposed to aspire? But we are not alone because Abba Father has placed a perfect model in Jesus who can take this journey. Why God doesn’t give us any other ideal but Jesus himself as our ideal? There are two reasons for that.

🞜 First: we are created in His likeness. God’s Spirit dwells in us and the Spirit of God makes us God’s Temple. What’s the significance the Temple had for the Jews? It was the pinnacle of their pride and magnificence. It was full of grandeur. The Temple was panelled by cedar from Lebanon by skilled craftsman in Phoenicia and the whole interior was overlaid with gold, and most of all, the holy of holies of the Temple housed the Ark of the Covenant which represented God’s presence itself. Dear Friends, like the physical Jerusalem Temple, each one of us, as the new Temple of God, is adorned, panelled and overlaid with God’s mercy and Christ’s truth. Most of all, as the holy of holies in the Jerusalem Temple housed God himself, our soul, the new holy of holies, houses God himself. So when we recognise our brothers and sisters as God’s Temple, the Temple in which the very presence of God dwells, we can love anyone no matter what they have done to us. We can overcome any barrier.

🞜 The second reason as to why God gives Jesus as our ideal in loving one another is if we follow any human ideal, one day we will be disappointed. Our deep down profound inner desire for love can’t be perfectly and completely satisfied and quenched by any human being. Not even your spouse or our parents or our children or friends. That is why St Augustine cries in his autobiography “Confessions”: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee, O Lord!” Jesus accepts us even when we are wallowing in the squalor of sin and he accepts us as we are and loves us for who we are. So acting towards others as God the Father acts towards us can transform us to be perfect as God is perfect and to love everyone as Christ’s love acts upon us.

Let me wind up this reflection with a free verse from Anne Osdieck: “Who can turn the other cheek, give away their coat, go two miles instead of one, love enemies and pray for all those who persecute them? Not us. Not without you, Lord. As you did from your cross, let us wage love, not war. Help us go way beyond being nonviolent. Give us generosity of spirit. We want to love as you do.”