

## *5 Sunday of Easter (C) – The Qualities of True Christian Love*

In today's Gospel we hear again that familiar challenge: *Love one another as I have loved you.* We recall those other words of Jesus that we sometimes sing: *By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you have love one for another.*

This is a challenge we all need to hear again because it is all too easy for us to slip into our own expectations of ourselves rather than those the Lord has of us.

What then would be the most significant features of true Christian love?

One would be that it is a Love that is **forgiving**.

In Jesus we see someone who forgives those who let him down, those who treat him badly. He experiences the shortcomings of his disciples and the abuse of those who oppose him. Yet still he loves them all: *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*

Surely we all experience hurts, abuse, desertion, cruelty of one kind or another. We are then tempted to harden our hearts, to repay like with like, to give way to bitterness, to seek revenge.

In the Penitential Rite of every Mass we pray for the grace of God to help us to overcome these temptations. We pray for the strength we need to forgive those who treat us badly. We seek to recognise that there are persons who have in fact forgiven us for *our* shortcomings. We rejoice in realising the forgiveness of God who loves us still – despite our many offences, betrayals, desertions and cowardice.

True Christian love is **caring**.

That is a word used so often these days that it has become limp, even trite. Its root is in the gothic verb *KARA* which actually means to lament. To care therefore means to share the pain of someone, to be alongside them in their troubles, to be compassionate – to feel with them.

Mother Theresa of Calcutta emphasised the value of this 'person to person caring'. *I do not believe in the big way of doing things. To us what matters is the individual. To love a person we must come into close contact with them.*

The members of the ecumenical monastic community founded in Taize by the late Brother Roger Schultz spend some time each year living with the desperately poor in some of the most squalid human conditions on earth. They share the life of the poor completely, not seeking to alleviate it in any way but entering fully into its suffering.

The temptation for us is always to distance ourselves from another's pain; to pass the problem on to some other person, some other agency or institution, to give our time to identifying the causes and solutions to suffering. The call of Christ is for us to give time to one another, to open our hearts to one another's grief and trouble.

This challenge of Christ's love comes to us daily in the Scriptures read at Mass. Over and over again we see the depth and the fearlessness of his caring. He feels for those in sorrow, he weeps for them. This kind of real caring is what is asked of each of us.

Christian love is love that is **selfless**.

It is easy to pledge ourselves to this. It is easy to think that we are being selfless in what we do. But if we examine our motives carefully we may well discover that there is still a part of us that is seeking to get something out of the love we are offering. We should reflect daily on the love we are giving – is there any self-seeking in what we are doing?

In the Mass we put ourselves in the presence of Jesus who gives himself totally for love of us. His dying on the Cross of Calvary was the supreme act of self-sacrifice. It is that love which reaches into our lives in the central prayer of the Eucharist. In every Mass we should pray that our love may become love without a hint of self-interest, love that is purified – redeemed, set free from sin and selfishness of any kind.

Finally, true Christian love is love that is **boundless**.

By that is meant that it puts no limits. No matter what is asked of us we are willing to respond, indeed to go further...*if a person asks you to go a mile with him, go two; if he asks for your coat give him your jacket as well.*

A love like this is, in the eyes of the world, a foolish love, open to abuse and exploitation. For this reason we find ourselves drawing lines: *Thus far and no further; it's too much – there are limits; I've done all that can be reasonably expected.* We may well have done all that is reasonable, but perhaps we have not yet done all that we can.

In our Holy Communion at Mass we experience the limitless love of Jesus. In the Blessed Sacrament is the sign of his presence with us day by day *until the end of time*. In our encounter with him we seek a growth in our own generosity. We recognise the boundaries of our loving and ask for the courage and confidence continually to extend them.

We draw our demarcation lines because we are afraid of losing out in some way. Yet Jesus tells us that we must be willing to *lose* if we wish to *find*.

All these teachings are familiar to us. We recognise their challenge. We should admit the need of such a spur to our endeavours. We are always falling short, always slackening our pace, and always finding excuses and justifications for not responding, not giving.

Yet only by such a love will we be true to our vocation as followers of Christ – and only by such loving will we be recognised as true disciples of the Lord.