

Homily for 6th Sunday of Easter 2018

It is a common scene in many a movie and in real life. A woman says to her husband, you never say “I love you” any more! But he replies, of course I love you. The fact of their love may be obvious to all. Their dedication, their hard work to keep the family together, the faithfulness of their relationship over the years. In spite of all that evidence she still says to him “you never say I love you”. On the other hand, sometimes those words could be a lie. They may be used only to get what the person wants. But that is their power.

Those particular words have taken on a deeply symbolic meaning in our culture. Maybe, other words could have been used. We human beings are symbolic creatures. It is one thing to tell the facts about some situation. Our symbols enable us to touch mysteries that are beyond any words. To say “I love you” is not just telling the facts. It is even more than expressing an emotion. In our culture they are part of a process that establishes and maintains a union between people. Indeed, a holy communion. A person puts oneself at considerable risk using them because they may take us to places unexpected and unknown.

To a large extent we Catholics know this intuitively. We are a symbolic religion. Sacraments are key symbols of our relationship with the divine. The Eucharist, for example, both establishes a communion between us and Christ and nourishes that union. It is not enough to do it once in a lifetime. So we come each Sunday. Symbols are like that. They can not only bear repetition. They demand it. Likewise, it is not enough for a man to say to a woman at the beginning of a relationship “I love you”. It is critical in some way or other to do it again and again and again.

I was reflecting on all this to try to get to the sense of John’s account of Jesus’ words in the Gospel. We make a mistake if we think that he is just telling us things about God. No. He is trying to put into words the mystery of Jesus’ relationship with the Father and inviting us to enter into it. Or rather to become aware of it because we are already in it! However, it is like love itself, impossible to adequately put into words. So we need poetry and music and all the arts to open windows to the divine and celebrate who we have become. We can, then, hear the words of the Gospel today as a meditation on who Jesus is, and how deeply and intimately he and the Father are in communion.

When we hear Jesus speak of his Father’s commandments we naturally turn to those ten we know so well. Jesus is talking about His Father’s commandments for him. However, it is not as though the Father had a list of things he wanted Jesus to do. Simply put I suppose he is expressing the truth that he and the Father are one. What Jesus does then is always in tune with the Father. There could be no difference in their will. “I have come not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38) he says elsewhere. So, also, if we are one with Christ what we do will be in tune with the Father also. Jesus’ one great commandment of course is “love one another as I have loved you.” And it is as the Father has loved him that Jesus loves us.

All this may give us some clue as to why in those early days Peter and the apostles were able to bring so many into the fledgling Church. We heard something of this in the Reading from the Acts of the Apostles today. There seemed to be no lengthy preparation for Cornelius and his household. They simply responded to the preaching of the apostles and to the astonishment of the others the Holy Spirit came upon them. So they were baptised. The apostles themselves after the Resurrection had a personal and unique encounter with the risen Lord. It was an experience of a communion that they found difficult to describe. This was a communion born out of a love made visible on the cross. The cross that itself has become a key symbol of God’s love. No man has greater love than that. Jesus died while we were still sinners and estranged from God. In that God does not have favourites.

Those early Christians may not have had a detailed knowledge of Jesus and all that he had said and done. But the power of the vision was such that there was a God who looked beyond differences between people. And beyond all those differences that separate us is the image of God implanted in our hearts. This God knows us very well. God sees the image of Christ there. And God’s will is that we be in communion with each other and with God. In the Eucharist God is saying to us again and again and again “I love you”. And hopefully on our part we are in Christ saying the same to God and each other again and again and again. And may this holy communion bear fruit in our daily, often hard, work of loving each other.

Fr Graham