

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

(For that is probably the only way in which you will express your love for God)

Canticle of Love

What is love? We take our cue from St. Paul's famous "hymn to love" in chapter 13 of First Letter to the Corinthians. The context that provoked the showering of praise on the theme of love was the deep conflict that had erupted at Corinth. The Corinthian church was ripped apart ostensibly because some members claimed to possess charisms of glossolalia, speaking in tongues and esoteric knowledge. In the eyes of the Corinthians those who possessed such spiritual gifts were seen to enjoy a higher status in the church. Paul the Apostle of Christ, took it upon himself to mend the rift that had torn the church, the Body of Christ, asunder. He was at pains to reverse the status indicators, to turn the tables so that greater honour might be given to those who are considered as having a lower status. Using the body analogy, he says that "God has formed the body together, giving all the more honour to the least members so that there is no bodily rupture and members are mutually concerned about one another" (1Cor.12.24-25). The eyes, ears, hands, are just as important as the head and heart. The metaphor of the body highlights the diversity and collaboration of the various members of the body. Paul expects the Corinthians to appreciate that the Church, the Body of Christ, should function like the human body and overcome its divisions and treat each member with the dignity he or she deserves.

Love, the Highest Value

Even though Paul claims that he himself enjoys the charismatic gifts of speaking in tongues, of prophecy, of esoteric knowledge and faith, he strongly maintains that these count for nothing if one does not have love. Giving up one's possessions or even sacrificing one's body, in the absence of love, all these efforts would be meaningless. Paul then goes on to state categorically that love (agape) is the cornerstone, the essential quality of Christian life. It is a gift beyond compare, (sans pareil) a gift 'par excellence', a 'sine qua non' of Christian living. (Collins, Sacra Pagina, 474).

Attributes of God

The essence or qualities of this love are selflessness, benevolence, readiness to forgive, patience and kindness (13.4). But these qualities are attributed to God:

*"turn to Yahweh your God again,
for He is all tenderness and compassion
slow to anger and of great kindness
and ready to relent"* (Joel: 2.3, Ex.34:6).

For Paul, love is not just one of the many virtues or spiritual gifts of God. It is not just an ethical or religious value; it is the very "power" of God poured into our hearts 'by the Holy Spirit' (Rom.5.5). (Collins,481,484).

Faith Hope and Love

In discussing the three theological virtues, namely, faith, hope and love, Paul places love in last position in order to highlight it as the highest good. "The greatest of these (three virtues) is love" (1Cor.13.13). Understandably Paul's thinking was shaped by the deep divisions that

tore the Corinthian church apart, hence the need to emphasize love as the overriding virtue, the fruit of the Spirit that heals rifts (Gal.5.22).

The Twofold Commandment of Love

The First Letter of John says: “anyone who loves God must love his brother” (1Jn.4.21). Love comes from God. He loved us first. It is God’s prior love that imposes an obligation to love our neighbor (Rom.13.8). The love of God and the love of neighbor are inextricably intertwined. The intrinsic connection between love of God and love of neighbor is also brought out clearly in Luke’s Gospel when a lawyer asks Jesus about the greatest Commandment. Jesus’ answer refers to Deuteronomy 6.5: You must love your God with your whole heart and secondly you must love your neighbor as yourself. This is taken directly from Leviticus 19:18. Luke collapses the twin Commandment into one, so that both Commandments now share the same force, the same power, the same authority (Collins, p.174).

God’s Revelation

The Gospel of John points out that “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life” (Jn.3.16). In so doing, He revealed His love for humankind.

Jesus was sacrificed on the cross in order to take our sins away (1Jn. 4.10). Jesus is the definitive manifestation of God’s infinite love and mercy. After all, writes St. John, “God is love” and His love is given gratuitously. It is not earned (1Jn. 4.8).

The collect prayer of the Divine Mercy Sunday says:

*God of mercy,
You wash away our sins in water
You give us a new birth in the Spirit
and redeem us in the blood of Christ,
Increase our awareness of these blessings.*

This revelation of God’s love and mercy through Jesus’ death and resurrection serves as the basis, the rationale why “we too should love one another (1Jn.4:11). St. Faustina’s memorial is a constant reminder of humankind’s indebtedness to God’s eternal mercifulness. The mercy of God embraces us “opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever in spite of our sinfulness” (The Face of Mercy, Pope Francis, no. 2).

Love your Enemies

An enemy is a person (or group) who is openly hostile, offensive, hateful and aggressive towards you. The Scripture speaks about a person who persecutes, hurts, curses, abuses, or strikes you (Lk.6 28-19); (Mt.5:44). Faced with such hostility, the Gospel of Matthew responds in a form of antithesis: "It was said: You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you: "Love your enemies" (Mt.5:43). The Commandment to love one's enemies flows from the golden rule of loving one's neighbour. It is this Commandment that gives meaning to loving one's enemies. Besides there is no Commandment in the Old Testament that says one ought to hate one's enemies (Richard, 17 Thessalonians, p.271). The object of hatred in the Old Testament, at least according to Psalm 139, are the enemies of God. God's enemies are also the enemies of the Israelites:

*"Yahweh, do I not hate these who hate you
and loathe those who defy you?
I hate them with a total hatred,
I regard them as my own enemies" (Ps.139:21-22).*

Loving one's neighbour, according to Leviticus (19:18) was understood to mean, loving a fellow-Israelite or members of God's people only. Loving one's enemies introduces a new dimension of the Christian message. There is nothing of a superior value in loving those who love you.

Whereas loving one's enemies demands an effort, determination, sacrifice, conviction and often a genuine change of heart. Humanly speaking, this does not often come easily. The natural human response is to want to get even with those who have wronged us or those whom we consider our enemies. Matthew further argues that we ought to love our enemies in order that "we may be sons of our Father in heaven" for God does not make a distinction between the righteous and un-righteous. He provides sun and rain to all his children (Lyonnet, S. La Carita, p.52 Harrington D. The Gospel of Matthew p.87)

Broadening the Objective of Love

The love of neighbour in (Leviticus 19:18) is restricted to the community of the people of God (Israelites). Jesus' new command "to love one's enemies" is intended to remove the limitations imposed on the Old Testament definition of neighbour in order to include one's enemies. Thus the object of love is broadened. Harrington in his commentary points out that the "love your enemies" command harps back on the verses; "eye for an eye", "tooth for a tooth" (Mk 5:38.) This law of retaliation was originally meant to curb acts of revenge within acceptable limits and to prevent violence from spiraling out of control. It also sought to affirm that punishment should fit the crime. The "love of enemies" on the other hand, sought to break this cycle of violence and hatred (Harrington, p.89).

Magnanimity

Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians rejects in "absolute terms" acts of retaliation: "See that none of you repays anyone evil for evil" (I Thes.5.15). He counsels the Christian community to embrace any custom that makes for peace, mutual improvement and good neighbourliness (Rom.12.19). "Vengeance is mine", say the Lord. "If your enemy is hungry, you should give him food" (Rom.12:19, 20). Showing such magnanimity will be like piling "red-hot coals on his head" (Rom 12:21)

Raising the Moral Bar

Jesus' command to love one's enemy is undoubtedly one of the most daunting Commandments. Daunting because it raises the moral bar. It demands of Christians "a standard of human relationships that goes beyond the norm of reciprocity." Johnson interprets the verse: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" to mean: "do as God would do." This goes beyond "do as you would want done" (Johnson, p.112). This is as incredibly challenging moral posture and attitude for Christians to assume - especially when one considers victims of war, of ethnic strife, of rape, of crime, of exploitation, of injustice, of betrayal etc. People in situations which initially appear to be hopeless, are capable of overcoming the odds because of the "inborn love" they already possess in their hearts. Faith is the acceptance of God's love in our hearts. God's love sets people free (Jn.8.32). Mary's Magnificat reminds us that God exalts the lowly, the victims, those who bear the brunt of the heartlessness of others. (Lk. 1.52).

In presenting a radically new understanding of the object of love, Jesus fulfilled and gave depth to the instruction (Torah) of the Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets (Mt. 5.17). He fulfilled the Old Testament teaching in his life, his teachings, his actions and in his ministry. Not only did he offer himself as a sacrifice on behalf of humanity but he also showed his love for his enemies by praying that they be forgiven: “Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” In light of Jesus’ new teaching, the love of neighbour has been broadened to include the love of enemy, now the question is who is my neighbour?

Who is my Neighbour?

It was the lawyer in the Gospel of Luke who asked Jesus a pointed question: “Who is my neighbour?” Jesus answered by telling a parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk.10.30-35). In that ethnically and religiously divided society, a hapless travelling Judean had fallen among heartless thieves who beat him up, stripped him, mugged him, and left him for dead. Johnson, commenting on this parable, makes some striking observations. First, the priest and the Levite, men who were well esteemed by their people and dedicated to holiness, passed by on the other side of the road and ignored a fellow-Jew in dire straits. Love of neighbour, even one of their own, meant nothing at all. Secondly, it was the Samaritan, a member of the despised ethnic group who did not fret about his safety, who stopped to attend to the victim of the marauding bandits. Thirdly, the point to be learnt is ‘not who deserves to be cared for, but rather, the demand to become a person who treats everyone encountered – however frightening, alien, naked or defenseless – with dignity and compassion’: “You go and do the same,” said Jesus. This was the answer to Jesus’ question: “Which of the three do you think turned out to be a neighbour to the one who fell among the bandits? (Lk.20.37), (Johnson, p.175).

Messenger of Grace

Luke follows the parable of the compassionate Samaritan with a rider in order to drive home the point about how we should treat others. Martha, the busy bee, complained to Jesus about Mary her sister, who just sat there to listen to Jesus instead of being involved in the house-chores. Jesus’ response to Martha was: “Mary has chosen the better part,” the listening part. Hospitality means paying attention to the guest, to the neighbour. Johnson concludes his commentary by saying that Jesus ‘turns the point from one of providing a service to receiving a gift: the other person (the neighbour) who comes into our space is a messenger of grace’ (Collins,175).

Exhortations on Loving One’s Neighbour

The love of God or one’s relationship with God expresses itself in showing love and mercy to one’s neighbour. It is therefore not surprising that scripture has many texts which encourage Christians to love, respect and show compassion to those in need. 1John has some hard sayings: he who hates his brother is a murderer (3.15). A man who does not love his brother that he can see, cannot love God whom he has never seen (4.20; 3.17).

The Letter to the Philippians underscores the virtue of humility – “Everyone is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself so that nobody thinks of his interests first” (2.13). This counsel would serve well especially those who are in the public service. Treating others with respect, kindness and patience goes a long way towards recognizing the dignity of other persons (Col.3.12). But this action, this doing, simultaneously says something about our internal disposition towards God. It is the power of grace moving our hearts to respond in a particular way. Paul encourages us to accept and to

forgive each other (Col.3:13). Those who are forgiven their many sins show much relief and great love (Lk.7:47). Evil is to be conquered with good deeds (Rom. 13:4). “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Mt.20:28). Jesus teaches convincingly by offering Himself as an example to be imitated: “If I, then, the Lord and Master have washed your feet, you should wash each other’s feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you” (Jn.13:15).

The exhortations on loving one’s neighbour are necessary and helpful particularly in a society or culture that appears to promote rampant individualism that closes in upon itself, and pays scant attention to the spiritual and material needs of the less fortunate.

“The poor will always be amongst you” (Mk.14:7). Those in positions of responsibility or those who have been materially well endowed, are expected to care for the poor rather than to enrich themselves at the expense of the needy (Mt.23:11). Leviticus offers a compelling model of charity that should be emulated and adjusted in accordance with the prevailing means of production:

“When you gather the harvest in your land you are not to harvest to the very end of the field. You are not to gather the gleanings of the harvest. You are neither to strip your vine bare nor to collect the fruit that has fallen in your vineyard. You must leave them for the poor and the stranger” (Lev. 19:9-10).

Self-enrichment in our society has become like a cancerous disease that smothers the voice of conscience.

The parable of the Prodigal Son invites us to emulate the forgiving, compassionate and welcoming father, the earthly image of the heavenly Father, “rich in mercy” (Eph.2:4). St. James reminds us that faith without works of mercy is a dead faith (Ja.2.15). St. Paul urges Christians not only not to seek revenge, but to love one’s enemies actively, to be charitable to one’s enemies (1Thess.5.15; Rom.12:17). It was said: “you must love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say love your enemies” (Mt.5:43). This is perhaps one of the most difficult sayings of the Gospel. We live in a world that has ethnic divisions, racial divisions, religious divisions, party political divisions, employer-employee relations, divisions between the rich and poor, divisions between citizens and foreign nationals etc. The perennial challenge is the management of these fault-lines in order to promote peace. These divisions are sometimes the context within which the love of one’s neighbour and the love of God expresses itself. It appears then that both questions should be asked:

*Who is my neighbour? and,
To whom am I neighbour?*

**+Buti Tlhagale o.m.i.
Divine Mercy Sunday
23/04/2017**