

Sixth Sunday of Easter - Love, the Heart of Christianity, is a many Splendored Thing  
May 5, 2024.

As we look forward to celebrating the Lord's Ascension and Pentecost's coming of his promised Spirit, our Easter season is drawing to a close. The mood of this Sunday's liturgy is reflective, inviting us to take in more fully the deep implications of our Easter faith. Standing out in this Sunday's readings is the theme of love. What more important theme is there for our restless human hearts? Reading this Sunday's Gospel reminds me of a song by Andy Williams, a popular singer in the 60's "Love is a many splendored thing / It's the April rose that only grows in the early Spring / Love is nature's way of giving / A reason to be living / The golden crown that makes a man a king / Once on a high and windy hill / In the morning mist Two lovers kissed and the world stood still / Then your fingers touched my silent heart and taught it how to sing / Yes, true love's a many splendored thing" Very often the meaning of real love is trivialized and distorted in today's popular culture. From our earliest years we learned what genuine love is, not from lessons in words, but by being loved ourselves.

This Sunday's readings invite us to recognize that the Paschal Mystery, that is the centre of our Easter celebration, is an expression of God's love for us, and an invitation to enter into the love of Jesus and his Father, and to give it expression in our own lives. True love expresses itself in action rather than in words. The Father's love, John's letter tells us, was expressed in our midst when he 'sent into the world his only Son, so that we could have life in him'. The words of Jesus in John's gospel (15:9-17) remind us how complete is the gift which he brings, as an expression of the love which he shares with the Father: 'A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friend'. Genuine love is an unselfish gift. It seeks the good of the beloved rather than its own benefit. God's love is an outreach of utter generosity; it comes before any response on our part, as John's letter points out. ('God loved us first'.) As we contemplate the mystery of God's generosity, we are reminded that, in the end, love is the most precious gift. Following the example of Jesus, love is a form of self-sacrifice which demands us to give, not just of the things we possess but of ourselves, our time and our talents. True joy is the finding of what our hearts are made for, then a love that is genuine brings a joy which is without compare: 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you ... I have told you this that my own joy may be in you and your joy be complete'. The fruit of genuine love is the intimacy of friendship – sharing all that matters in one's life with the beloved: 'You are my friends ... I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father'.

The first reading continues the story of the early Church (Acts 10:15-16, 34-35, 44-48). As Peter baptizes Cornelius, the first gentile convert, we are reminded of our theme: God's generous love is for all, 'God does not have favourites 'anybody 'who fears God (i.e. has a loving reverence before God) and does what is right and acceptable to him'. Like Cornelius, we too have, through our baptismal sharing in the Paschal Mystery, been given a share in the mystery of the love of the Father and the Son. The fundamental truth is that God has declared his choice, taken us on and loved us right from the beginning even before we were born. It is his love for us that led him to send his Son into the world to take away our sins.

In the second reading for this Sunday (1 John 4:7-10), we read: "the person without love has known nothing of God, for God is love." (1 John 4:8) Stern and fierce in their decisions, never considering the pain and grief of the person they censured, the Ephesians were following the rules, keeping the dogmas, but not practicing the faith. Their community was not reflecting the love of God. They were orthodox for the sake of being orthodox, but in reality they were not Christians. We can look at the history of the Church and see how this mistake was repeated. For example, how can we find justification for the Spanish Inquisition, for the pillaging that was part of the Crusades, for the religious wars occasioned by the Protestant Reformation, or for the continual persecution of the Jewish people in the Middle Ages and beyond? God's love was absent in all these events. Still, as a community and as individuals, we are still repeating the mistakes of the

Ephesians. For example, take gay bashing. A person may have a gay orientation and not be engaging in any form of immorality just as a person may have a heterosexual orientation and not be engaging in any form of immorality. But even if people are immoral, openly so, no one has the right to attack them, to treat them with scorn, to refuse compassion when they are hurting. Where is God's love in the reputedly good Christian who seeks ways to hurt someone who is gay?

Is the love of God evident in our own family structures? Yes, out of love for our children and our teenagers, we have to have rules and set guidelines so they can grow, develop, and spread their wings while they are still under our protection. More importantly, these rules are set for love. We make rules for our children because we love them. At the same time, we have to be careful that we never allow a rule to destroy love. For example, saying to a teenager: "You know the rule. You broke it. Now get out of this house." or "You broke the rules, you are no longer part of this family," These attitudes are not the ways Christians should act. No good was ever accomplished by hiding love behind rules. Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me so I have loved you. Live on in my love. You will live in my love if you keep my commandments. This is my commandment, love one another as I have loved you." Fulfilling the commandment of love draws us into the family of God. In the evening of our life, we will not be judged by our weaknesses or our faults but on the amount of love we have shown. As St. Paul's discourse on love (1 Cor 13: 1-13) says, 'If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong...if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing...if I give away all my possessions...but do not have love, I gain nothing...And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.' As the lover always seeks the presence of the beloved, God is always longing for our abiding in Him. so we must always remain in the company of our God.

Today's gospel leads us to pray: Lord, help us to be people whose structures as a country, a family, and in all relationships, reflect the presence of your love.