

Mass for Peace

Vigil of the Sacred Heart

Today we pray for the gift of peace, in the mid-point of our Forty Hours Devotion and on the Vigil of the Feast of the Sacred Heart.

Whenever I think of this lovely Feast, the first words which come to mind are those of the traditional hymn with which we began our Mass this evening.

Sweet heart of Jesus

Fount of love and mercy

Today we come, thy blessings to implore.

These words sum up our desires and our prayers and indeed the road we must take to find peace.

The heart of Jesus is a fount of love, for us all. This is so because God has set His heart on us, because He has seen in us the beauty of His own creation and has filled us with His

Holy Spirit. This love of God for us, displayed in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, is never withdrawn, never held back. This is the simple nature of perfect love: it does not count offences and it is always ready to excuse.

Yet here we quickly learn another profound truth about love. Love always involves suffering. The Sacred Heart of Jesus is a wounded heart. It is a heart pierced for our sake. Indeed the piercing of this Heart is precisely the sign that the love of Jesus for us is total: it costs everything.

Now this truth about love is not strange to us. In our own experience, we set out on a pathway of love somehow thinking that this is the answer to all our pain and suffering, to our ingrained sense of loneliness. We give ourselves willingly to the beloved and rejoice in the love which we receive in return. We always want to do our best. Yet as love progresses it brings with it its trials, its heartaches and its wounds. Sooner or later a characteristic of faithful loving is an experience of pain and of suffering. We experience this whenever, for the sake of love, we endure a hurtful row; or sustain love through a long and bitter silence; or remain faithful through turbulent years, such as can occur when children go through difficult phases in growing up. These are the wounds of love which are familiar and we bring them to the Lord today and implore his blessings.

The words of the hymn also remind us that this Sacred Heart is also a fountain of mercy. It is from here that the gift of forgiveness flows.

How can this be? Perhaps only slowly can we learn this inner truth: here is a love which does not take offence, which never turns away and which, therefore, overcomes every wrong doing, every insult and every rejection. Unlike our own loving, which we suspect can always be pushed too far, from which too much can be demanded, here is a love which knows no bounds. It 'proves' itself as such ultimately by springing back into full glorious life even from the tomb of its apparent defeat.

This is the love to which we come when we know we have failed. This is the spring of mercy from which we can drink, so that, little by little in our own poor ways we can extend to others something of this same healing mercy. But we can do so only if we draw the gift from here.

At the end of the Gospel passage this evening we heard the words : 'They will look upon the one whom they have pierced.' This is a vivid reminder that we are the perpetrators of the wrong doing that mars our world. We human beings are the source of our own lack of peace, our continuing

contestations and struggles. We are the ones who pierce the hearts, minds and bodies of our brothers and sisters in every time and place: out of fear, out of envy, out of hatred, out of the desire to dominate.

So when we come to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in prayer for peace, we must look on the one whom we ourselves have pierced, recognising in him the brother and sister whom we have offended.

The words of the Gospel are, in fact, taken from the Book of Zechariah where they continue in this way: 'They will look upon the one they have pierced; they will mourn for him as for an only son and weep for him as people weep for a first born child.' This is the depth of human sadness and recrimination: when the first born, the only son, is snatched away and all that hope for the future dashed to pieces.

Yet the words of the Prophet also contain a promise: 'Over the House of David and the citizens of Jerusalem I will pour out a spirit of kindness and prayer.' Indeed the message is clear: when we are humbled enough to look on the one we have pierced and accept what we have done, then the Lord will give us that spirit of kindness and peace for which we so long.

St Paul is quite clear. Through Christ, the love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit to the extent that we are no longer enemies, but, in contrast, filled with joyful trust in the Lord.

Such is our prayer as we celebrate this Feast. Such is our prayer in this Mass for Peace, when we have in mind all the troubled spots of our world – Cumbria, Gaza, Afghanistan, Iraq, and so many more - and all the trouble of our own hearts. We bring them to the Lord today and during the next period of our Forty Hours of prayer.

‘Touch our hearts, O Lord, so cold and so ungrateful, and make them, Lord, thine own for ever more.’

+ Vincent Nichols