

Sixth Sunday of Easter

21.05.2017
By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

In this week's short text from the fourth gospel, we hear the extraordinary focus of John on love. This is not the gospel of "Love your enemies", this is the gospel of friendship, love, belonging and abiding.

Text

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

Comment

John's gospel is an extraordinary one. The latest to be written of all of the gospels, it demonstrates the most sophisticated Christology of all four. In John's Gospel, we hear nothing about Jesus' birth or childhood, we hear nothing of Joseph, and Jesus' mother is typecast as a redemptive archetype of Eve (she is the Woman who, at the wedding of Cana, causes her son to do something with fruit, like the antitype of Eve in the Genesis narrative). Jesus, too, is confident about his identity, using seven "I am" statements after the seven signs of the gospel narrative; each "I am" increasing in its audacity until finally, at the grave of Lazarus, Jesus' "I am the resurrection and the life" is tantamount to blasphemy and provides his opponents with the final straw to destroy him.

So, it is a delight that in a gospel with so sophisticated a story about Jesus' divine identity we find a strong motif of love and friendship.

John's gospel does not contain any references to enemy, but has a strong motif of friendship. Jesus does not say that his followers should love their enemies, but rather that they should love their friends. This is not to say that these two are

antithetical to each other; perhaps we can understand that when a person is in a beloved community their capacity to show love to others outside of that community is deepened. To know how to love those who do not love us, it is important to have shown and received love in the first instance.

And this is the message of Jesus of John's gospel. When he brought the disciples together for this final meal, Jesus begins by showing love, through service; even shocking service, by washing their feet. Now he speaks about love, about belonging, about abiding, about having an advocate, in some of the most clearly Trinitarian texts of the gospels. In this, we have the Word of God speaking about the Source of all Love, the Father, and the Spirit, she who will support the faithful as they wait.

Into this trinity of sustaining love, we, as the friends of Jesus, are wrapped. This deepens the understanding of salvation that is found at the heart of John's gospel. The incarnation of God in Jesus is not because God despaired at humanity, or because God's wrath needed to burn, but because of Love. God so loved the World... And now, we hear these words of extraordinary love and mysticism:

On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

This is an invitation to be wrapped into the mystery that is the Trinity, the source of life, the source of love and the source of friendship.

What does all of this have to do with conflict? This is perhaps one of the most conflict-appropriate texts we can imagine. In the face of suffering, an imperial torture, Jesus speaks to his friends about love. As we consider our trials and pains, our conflicts and our divisions as humanity, how is it that we can be nurtured at and by the heart of love? To know oneself as beloved may give us the courage to change, the bravery to resist, the insight to speak and the imagination to act.

Response

A simple response to this beautiful text is simply to share stories of prayer with people you know: friends in a congregation; friends in a prayer group; friends with whom you speak about spirituality. To share our stories of prayer, our stories of seeking to be nurtured in and by the heart of love, may support us as we deepen our practice of prayer, and deepen our engagement with the source of love and goodness, into which we are wrapped, through the body, story, live, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Prayer is not a burden, although it may ask much of us. Prayer is an invitation, and we are wise to test this way and that way in order to know how best to work prayer into our lives. But however we try, it is best to keep trying, to keep engagements with the heart of love as part of our regular routines. Prayer, like deep breathing, is good for the body and good for the soul.

Prayer

Beloved Jesus,
You loved your friends.
Presumably, you loved their eyes, their faces,
their stories, their foibles, their eccentricities.
You loved them in the delight of their humanity,
and they loved you in yours.
We offer you our love, and offer you our stories,
in the hope that we might begin to believe
what it is to be loved.
And in so doing,
we may show love
even in days of death.
Amen.

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Inner Journey