

Homily **Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C** (3.2.19)

You know, that second reading, I think, from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, is the most known text outside the Gospels, mainly because it can be used and often is chosen for marriage ceremonies. But just as a little aside, before I became a priest and studied Scripture, I used to always wonder what it meant when it said,

"Now we are seeing a dim reflection in the mirror," and I was thinking,

"Well, mirrors are pretty good, they're not dim reflections, are they?"

Until I learned, of course, that the bulk of people couldn't afford glass and their mirror for them was a flattened piece of copper. I had a copper pan once, and I checked it out and looked in it, and I thought,

"Gosh, you're handsome." [laughter]

And of course, it was a dim reflection. It's true, but the text that I want to pick on here is this description of love. St. Paul almost gets there to really addressing all of us involved in church. Now last week, he talked about the body of Christ being like a human body with limbs and he said the arm can't say to the leg,

"I don't want to be an arm," or else it will be chaos.

And everybody has their place, it was the political theory of the day and he applies it to the church that everybody has a function.

And he names some of those functions: some of them are offices like catechists or teachers, and some of them are gifts and talents, like the gift of tongues, but he moves on to here, and he grounds it in something that's very fundamental, because he points out that if you do any these things, if you take a task in church, if you become involved in church, and there's no love behind it, then it's just dead works, because love gives things meaning. And it stops us being focused on self, and aggrandizement, or power grabbing and it puts it into the true work of service.

But what I do like is his approach to love, because it's one of those words, isn't it? In English, it's very weak, I've said this before. You can say anything from I love potato crisps to I love you, ergo, you are a potato crisp. [laughter] You're on a par with crisps, whereas real Christian love is much deeper and he knows it's a mystery that you can't exhaust, so he tackles it first with negatives, doesn't he? As if it was a big circle he wonders round the edges and says,

"It's not this, it's not that, it's not boastful, it's not arrogant, it's not rude."

So he puts the outer barriers round love, and then he does the positive things, doesn't he?

It's always patient and kind and it revels in good things. So he fleshes it out without exhausting the mystery of love. But you know, I'm left saying, and I was thinking about this, and I've found, I was searching this yesterday in my mind. What about the ordinary person in the pew? I mean, many people do say,

"Well, I couldn't do this, I couldn't be a catechist, I couldn't offer any talents."

People who feel they have nothing to offer in terms of service and worry about their Christian responsibility. And I remembered the perfect answer to that, it's beautiful. I don't know whether you know her, I'm sure you all do, St Therese of Lisieux - she was a nobody. She joined, following her two sisters, into the convent, died nine years later of TB in her 20s, not known by anyone, a spiritual director thought she was marvellous and told her to write down her life story and her spiritual journey, but she struggled all that time. She struggled for a lot of that time, I should say, with meaning.

She said,

"I don't know where I fit in the church. I can't be this, I can't be that. There's no place for me."

She was really worried about it. And in her beautiful autobiography, and I think it's a perfect answer for anybody who feels that, she makes the best commentary I've ever seen on St Paul's letter.

And she says this,

"I was still being tormented by this question of unfulfilled longings... when I decided to consult St Paul's epistles in the hope of getting an answer. It was the 12th and 13th chapters of I Corinthians that claimed my attention. The first of these told me that we can't all of us be apostles, all of us be prophets, all of us doctors and so on. The church is composed of members which differ in their use. The eye is one thing and the hand is another. It was a clear enough answer, but it didn't satisfy my aspirations, didn't set my heart at rest. Reading on to the end of the chapter I met this comforting phrase.

'Praise the best gifts of heaven, meanwhile I'm going to show you a better way.'

What was it? The apostle goes on to explain that all the gifts of heaven, even the most perfect of them, without love, are absolutely nothing. Charity is the best way of all, because it leads straight to God. Now, I was at peace. When St Paul was talking about the different members of the mystical body, I couldn't recognise myself in any of them... If the church was a body composed of different members, it couldn't lack the noblest of all. It must have a heart and a heart burning with love."

Isn't that beautiful? And she answers the question, I think, when we all feel we don't know what we can do or offer. She is saying it's got to be grounded in a heart of love and that empowers others in church.