

6TH SUNDAY OF EASTER, B
OBEDIENCE: THE HALLMARK OF LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP WITH CHRIST
"This is My commandment: love one another as I have loved you" (Jn. 15: 12)

The overarching theme that flows through all the Readings today, including the Psalm, is the love of God or God's love for us and the invitation to us to love Him back through loving one another. One word that has been most used, misused, abused, misunderstood, misconceived, and contradicted is love. Perhaps, because of its wide range of semantic usage in daily conversations and discourse. Yet love is the commonest denominator in us all. The reason being that we were created in love in the image of God who is love, as John tells us in the Second Reading (1 Jn. 4: 7-10). Therefore, each of us is or should be, a replica of that divine love. This is the challenge before us today as we reflect on this invaluable theme.

"As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Remain in My love": When Jesus says this, what kind of love is He referring to? From my text, the word "love" appears seventeen times in all of today's Readings. Quite an emphasis! Therefore, it is necessary to spend some time to understand the concept of the word to be able to apply it to our lived experience correctly. The Greek language with which the New Testament was written has six different words for love: Eros, Philia, Storge, Philautia, Xenia and Agape. "Eros" refers to romantic love. This usage, though is found twice in the Old Testament, does not appear at all in the New Testament. So, this is not what Jesus is referring to. He does not invite us to have romantic love for/with God nor for/with one another. "Philia" is understood as filial love or brotherly love, friendship, affectionate regard. St. Augustine of Hippo used this kind of "love to describe the love of equals who are united in a common purpose, pursuit, good, or end." The nuance of "Philia" is found in today's Gospel where Jesus says to His disciples: "I call you friends." By calling His disciples "friends", Jesus declares His welcoming heart to receive those who love Him by keeping His commandments. Abraham was the first to be called a "friend" of God in the Bible because of His faith expressed through obedience (2 Chron. 20: 7; Is. 41: 8). In John 15: 14, Jesus lays it out unequivocally: "You are My friends if you do what I command." He invites us to let him walk with us through the journey of life as a friend, a companion, Who loves and cares. Will you let him? Are we ready to show our love for Him through obedience? It is through obedience that we demonstrate our perfect love of God. Then there is the word "Storge" which translates to familial love, used to refer to the love within the family. It is that love that flows instinctually because of our natural affiliation with the person. It is the love a parent has for her children and vice versa. Even though "Storge" is used to describe the love of parents and children, this is not the word Jesus uses when He speaks of the between Himself and the Father. The love between Jesus and the Father is a relationship that enjoys a perfect sublime mystery. "Philautia" is the word the Greeks used to describe self-love; regard for one's happiness or advantage. This is extremely basic. The love of the other takes its root from the measure of one's love for himself/herself. The golden rule (Do to others what you would have them do to you) is founded on this basic need; "Love your neighbour as yourself" was part of the core ethical codes of the Jewish people which

Jesus articulated as well (Lev. 19: 18; Mk. 12: 31). But the love of self is also seen as a moral flaw when it becomes excessive. Then it is vanity, selfishness, self-centredness or egotism and self-obsession. Therefore, one must be careful to draw the limits to the love of self to place the balance. There is also “Xenia” which refer to hospitality towards the other, especially a guest or foreigner as when Abraham welcomed the three guests, whom he later realised were angels (Gen. 18: 1-15). These are all different kinds of love that are referred to in the Bible. Each, but the first, is good and worthy of practice. However, the love that Jesus is inviting us to have for one another in emulation of His love for us is the “Agape” love.

The Agape Love: This is used to express the love that is unconditional, selfless, sacrificial. The Angelic Theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas, describes this love as that which “wills the good of the other.” God the Son became man, not for His own sake, but our good. The Incarnation is a concrete revelation of God’s selfless love for us. Both St. Paul VI and St. John Paul the Great agree that it is only through selfless and self-giving love that we can actualize our humanity. For St. Paul VI, Man ... cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” (Gaudium et Spes 24). St. John Paul II says: “We become most truly human in the measure in which we go out of ourselves and give ourselves for the sake of others...” (Love and Responsibility). In agape the beloved does not need to deserve to be loved. It is love that comes from the generous heart of the giver, who is “blind” to the weakness and sins of the beloved. St. Paul expresses this model when he reminds us that “God shows us His love for us that while we were, yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5: 8). The agape lover empties himself or pours out himself to serve the needs of the beloved. St. Paul tells us that “Though He (Jesus) was God ... emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant ...” (Phil. 2: 6, 7). While stating His mission, Jesus said: “I came not to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20: 28; Mk. 10: 45). In another instance, He reminds us “I stand among you as one who serves” (Lk. 22: 27). And so, He washed the feet of His disciples as an example for all of us to know that true love is expressed in freedom to lay down one’s ego and desires and let them be taken up by the needs of the other. Agape love is that which breaks walls that divide to build bridges that unite. It is open to humanity of every descent as children of the one God. Such openness made Peter “come to realise” the indiscriminate nature of God’s love, which disposed him to embrace Cornelius in the First reading (Acts 10: 25-26, 34-35, 44-48). God’s love for both Jews and gentiles was manifested when the Holy Spirit was poured out on Cornelius, the first non-Jews to become Christian and his household. Peter’s confession on this occasion is timeless: “The truth I have now come to realise is that God does not have favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable by him.”

“I call you friends”: By calling us “friends” Christ close the gap between the divine and mundane, between God and man, thus, making us one with Him, sharing a common “Abba, Father!” By calling us “Friends”, Christ welcomes us as His companions and makes Himself available to walk with us through life. By calling us “friends” Christ invites us to be with Him, so that wherever He is, we may also be (Jn. 14: 3). Our response to this invitation must be marked by demonstrative obedience to the Commandments of God. Obedience

is the hallmark of this friendship; “You are My friends if you do what I command you”, says Jesus. The call has been made, the offer is available, the condition is laid out: it is then our choice to decide either to be His friends or otherwise.

My dear friends, God has shown us so much, love. He now invites us to show that same love to one another – love that is sincere, practical, unconditional, sacrificial, and self-effacing. These are the fruits that we have been chosen by Christ to bear in the world so that others may know that we are His friends. By loving one another in this way, we live out our true nature as children created in the image of God, our Father, Who is love.