

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Fr. Ben Frie SJ

The high word of this celebration is 'love'. The commandment to cherish and practice love. It was not new; it had been written in the Old Testament in various places since a long time. The threefold love: God, neighbor and self - was also commonplace. So what does Jesus add when He says: a new commandment I give you? Well, the measure of love was not yet so explicitly given, but now it is: to the extreme. At the moment when Jesus gives his commandment, Judas has just left during the last supper. At that very moment He tells His disciples: my commandment is, that you love one another. One day later, Judas' betrayal was fatal to him and the commandment of love was smashed in pieces.

Behold the measure of God's love: the measure of the man Jesus, who gives all that he has. It is almost discouraging, because we will never reach that level. What He does, we cannot do. And now we must love as He loved us. Why do we have to stress and say that the best is not good enough? How can we live up to that, how can we tip-toe around it?

I read in the Acts of the Apostles that disciples are exhorted to persevere in the faith and to enter the Kingdom of God through many afflictions. What kind of faith is it that we confess? Are torments necessary, are they a way to God? Fortunately, John has added to his book Apocalypse or Revelation the apotheosis that God will wipe away the tears from all eyes and death will be no more. No, says the vision, if we believe, evil is no longer under our skin or in our eyes, our hearts and souls - it is conquered. 'Behold, I make all things new': the old, the evil, everything that can be fought over is history. It is a mighty voice calling: God dwells among men, He will dwell with them! God is here and we shiver...

That is the miracle we are allowed to witness: God shows his reality in our midst. He takes human form, he participates in the torments of the human race, but he also makes them transparent. No matter how Jesus is presented, it only makes sense when we also see his wounds, his suffering, the ordeal that people put him through to see who is the strongest. God is tested: me or you, God or man, life or death, evil spirit or goodness itself. And then the vulnerable Jesus, mortally wounded, shows that God does not deliver Himself to human weakness and imperfection, to human mistrust. He is stronger than the human measure, yes, stronger than death. God is above it all. Great language, but what does it all mean anyway?

We are redeemed, we say. We hardly believe it, but we dare to let the words of Jesus be true for us. We do not want to deny our inner freedom, we do not let fears and uncertainties take over our lives. We allow ourselves to be liberated, to surrender to the only thing that can save us: our God, our depth, our soul, more intimate than all intimacies. Within that, within the most intimate thing we have, God is true, strong, convincing. A foundation. God is irrefutably the origin of our souls, the designer of our lives, not for evil, not for torment, but for freedom that can only exist when we see and accept our limitations, our incapacity, our suspicion and everything that breaks us down instead of building us up. Whoever dares to let God in in this way can gradually taste the truth of that word 'salvation'.

I give you a new commandment, I add it to what already exists: you must love one another. This is never obvious. You have to work at it. Jesus continues: as I have loved you, so you also must love one another. 'As I have loved you' - an impressive example, but almost unachievable. Nevertheless, you also must love one another: how liberating that can be, all those who have come so far as to say: I love you. Now I know what love can be, I experience

love and feel liberated from everything that makes me unhappy, lonely and useless. I follow the new commandment of Jesus - with you.

We know that Jesus is near us, who lets us share in his glory with infinite love, and that is death conquered by love. That is the taste of divine life: love that surpasses death. Let the new life that He shows you then enter you, let it disturb you, make you uncertain, confuse you - but above all, let it make room for the love that surpasses all imagination. Let your heart speak. After all, the Creator meets you in his Son, especially in your torments, and dissolves them, makes them transparent. And when you allow this, you feel how He loves. Every one of us. And you feel that you yourself become capable of it.

Paul and Barnabas speak of the Spirit becoming active in them. It must have been a strong feeling, a sensation that something is happening in you that is greater than you. They allowed the power of the Spirit to work in them and came to an almost superhuman intensity of relating, which they could only explain as coming directly from God. See, said the people about them, how they love one another. Would they say the same of us?