

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN LIFE: 31st SUNDAY B

Jesus has just told you and me what is the most important thing in the world. That's to be a loving person. So, we are meant to love our God with our whole self, i.e. with our whole mind, whole heart, and whole will - in fact, with every fibre of our being. The second part of being a loving person is to love and care for our neighbour every bit as much as we love and care for ourselves.

It's only right that we should do so. After all God has loved us first. The very fact that we are alive and here today is because our God has loved us into life. In the second place Jesus calls us to love God with our entire being because his whole life and death have been a manifestation, and even a pouring out, of God's tender love for every single one of us. Being loved into life by God as both our Creator and Redeemer, we are called to mirror and reflect the love that has made and redeemed us, by reaching out in love to other persons.

Reaching out to others with loving hearts involves our emotions. We feel for the different people in our lives. However, what is more essential and more important than any feelings we have about them is that we act for their well-being and happiness. When e.g. the gospels speak of the love in the heart of Jesus, they highlight his specific acts of kindness and generosity. To put this in a personal way: In loving another person I value that person. I value that person so much that I seek through my own resources, whatever they may be, to assist him or her in their wellbeing, happiness and development. I will seek to do so in concrete and practical ways. In the process I will extend myself beyond my personal needs, interests and concerns, to the interests, concerns and needs of the person I am seeking to assist.

This approach to loving one's neighbour as another self is the opposite of selfishness and self-preoccupation. It overcomes a natural and inborn tendency to think of myself first, to put my needs before the needs of anyone else, and to keep telling myself that they must paddle their own canoe and I mustn't get involved. So, it overcomes our natural instinct to keep thinking: 'Just mind your own business!' even when that other person in my life is in acute pain and clearly needs me now. But when I truly care for another person, I put the needs of that other person first and let their needs influence and alter my personal choices, priorities and actions.

For us Christians, our concrete ways of loving others are intimately connected with our love for God. Love for God, in fact, can be expressed only in a way which corresponds to our way of being in the world. It can function, then, only within the network of our interpersonal relationships. In fact, our love for God and neighbour are, in fact, one and the same love. So, our love and loving care for other human beings is not in competition with our love for God but the concrete and practical ways in which we express our love for God. In practice, the two commandments to be a loving person are just one commandment.

Let me give you one striking example of all this: - When Paul O'Reilly, a Jesuit priest, was working in the Amazon rain-forest in South America as a medical doctor, he had a young patient called Jeffrey. When Jeffrey was ten, his mother died. Three months later, his father abandoned Jeffrey and his two sisters and emigrated to a rich country. The three children were taken in by an uncle who worked as a teacher in a very poor village deep in the rain-forest. One day, when Jeffrey was 12, he and his sisters did not have enough food to eat. So Jeffrey climbed a mango tree to try to get some fruit.

His uncle had told him not to, but Jeffrey couldn't stand seeing his sisters going hungry. But he fell down 30 feet from the tree and broke his back. He was left paralyzed from the middle of his chest downwards. The people with him carried him on a stretcher 20 days walk through the forest to a little hospital in the nearest town. There he lay for a whole year. At the end of that year in hospital, he was in a bad way. He was just skin and bones and had pressure sores all over his back. He was in constant pain and was obviously dying. His uncle and sisters cared for him as best they could. But day by day he got worse and worse. So they decided to take him home since they couldn't bear for him to die in hospital. But unable to carry him another 20 days journey through the forest, they appealed to their local church community for help.

God touched the hearts of their next door neighbours Henry and Colette Melville, a married couple with children of their own, to take in the whole family and care for them. Colette, in particular, looked after Jeffrey night and day for six months till he died. And when he died she wept for him as for one of her own children.

Of all the people he has ever known, Paul says, she was the one who loved the Lord her God with all her heart, all her mind, all her strength and all her might. And more than anyone else he has ever known, she is the one who truly loved her neighbour as herself. What an amazing example for us of true love at work!

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