

The 7th Sunday of the Year – 2011.

It is the first time in his first letter to the Corinthians that St. Paul uses the word 'temple'. It is difficult for us to appreciate how hard it must have been to use it in the way he does. For all his life as a Jew, the word temple would have meant the 'Temple in Jerusalem' which was the heart of Jewish worship and had been for a long time. Not only that, the Temple had only just been rebuilt and its newness held out a bright future for the faith and worship of Israel. Herod's rebuilding of the Temple was a fitting reminder that this place for the Jews, and for a long time for Paul, was the place where God came closest to his people making this place utterly and massively holy.

However, the Temple did not have a future. It was destroyed in AD 70 and Paul began a process which robbed the Temple of its significance for the followers of Jesus. The great Temple in Jerusalem now had no value because as Paul says "Didn't you realise that you were God's Temple and that the Spirit of God was living among you..the Temple of God is sacred and you are that Temple."

The new Temple where God lives is no longer made of inanimate stones but of living human beings who are changing and growing all the time. That means that the new Temple is growing and changing as well because it is itself a body made up of many parts, a body which St. Paul later calls the Body of Christ.

The dynamic and life giving Spirit of God dwells in the Body and it is love that brings about the growth and new opportunity. Love is that vital ingredient which draws us deeper into life itself and prepares for the glory which will be ours when we rise with Christ into the life of God as one new and glorified Temple.

As all of us know only too well, love has many definitions and manifestations and not all of them are the kind of love that Jesus means in his Gospel today. It is only by obedience to the message of Christ that we grow towards the perfection of love which Christ himself is.

In today's Gospel, once again Jesus puts himself in a very dangerous position. Claiming an authority that we know all about but which his contemporaries could not understand, Jesus changes a law that had an almost 2000 year history and which was well respected. In its time the 'eye for an eye' law was remarkably good because it changed the previous law which said there was no limit on retaliation for an offence; blood could legally be shed for the slightest offence. With this law there was an attempt to match the retaliation to the seriousness of the original crime. Jesus overturns this and says that there must be no retaliation. We are to offer no resistance. If someone hits you on the right cheek then offer him the other one so that he can do the same again. If someone demands your shirt give him your suit as well.

Jesus goes further and changes the law of love of neighbour. It was assumed that your neighbour was your fellow Jew and anyone else who failed to fit into that category was excluded, was not your neighbour and could be hated within the law, with everything that followed. Jesus opposes this and says that we are to love our neighbour and our enemies.

Jesus did not just talk about this kind of love he lived it because this is precisely what he did on the Cross. He accepted an unjust and cruel death out of love and divine healing flowed from it.

Jesus brought an old law into a completely new expression and gives his followers his Holy Spirit that this new expression might shape everything we do and are. As we heard at the end of this Gospel "You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

How often is the quality of our love found wanting because we have been hurt by the action of another; how easy it seems and natural to respond with hatred or impatience. How often is the quality of our love lessened because we are overcome with a desire for the satisfaction of this need or that aspiration? How easy it is for our drive to survival to become stronger than the will to love as Christ loves.

The type of love that Jesus expects of us will always be a challenge because we are still on the way to the perfection that Jesus mentions but it is not impossible for us.

Not impossible because we are the Temple of the Holy Spirit and we have nothing less than the power of God to change situations for the better. We may feel downtrodden and oppressed, it could be that reality seems to be against us, it could even be that another person seems to want our downfall or even destruction; it could be that our desire for pleasure and consolation seems to be the only way ahead. Let us not allow any of that to deceive us. We are in a position of strength and have the power to change situations for the good by our words, by our thoughts, by our decisions and the ways in which we respect and listen to people.

How often can we be scared and horrified by the action of another which seems to us to be wicked and offensive, undermining and irresponsible. How often do we deepen the negativity by responding with the same offensiveness and irresponsibility that we perceive in the other. But how often, when we enter into a sensitive and attentive listening relationship with that person, does the whole thing change. We suddenly realise that the other person was not being bad, they were in fact being good and that there was reason for their behaviour. To show love was to try and understand them rather than condemn them.

So often we will be attacked by a problem or a negative experience and become locked into it, unable to see a positive outcome. When that happens all we need do is return to prayer and allow God to bring all the different and conflicting elements together and we will appreciate more deeply that anyone who obeys what Christ has said will experience the perfection of God's love.