

## Homily for the Twenty Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)(5<sup>th</sup> September 2010)

In this last of the series of homilies looking at some key elements of the teaching of Pope Benedict XVI we arrive at the real heart of his thinking, the idea which underpins everything else. It is very simple, it is the primacy of Love. Looking at all that Pope Benedict has said and done, this theme returns again and again. His first Encyclical, the first great teaching document that he wrote after becoming Pope, was called *Deus Caritas Est* – God is Love. He makes very clear what the point of that letter is, and you could say it is also the thing that drives his whole ministry as Pope. This is what he says:

*‘Love is the light—and in the end, the only light—that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working. Love is possible, and we are able to practise it because we are created in the image of God. To experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter into the world—this is the invitation I would like to extend with the present Encyclical.’<sup>1</sup>*

Love is the only light that can sustain us, and what the Pope wants for every one of us is that we should know that we are loved, and by virtue of that knowledge we can then bring light into the world. That is worth holding onto as we watch and listen to his visit, that is the underlying theme: to help us know we are loved, and thus to bring light into the world.

Love, of course, is a word that is easily spoken, but it is not always easy to be sure of what people mean by it. What is Pope Benedict getting at? He begins, perhaps surprisingly, with our experience. Being a person of love does not begin with what we do, or what we say; it does not start from our activity, it begins with us being passive and receptive. If I want to know how to be more loving, I must start by watching and waiting for the Lord. Here is something he said long before becoming Pope:

*‘The core of faith rests upon accepting being loved by God, and therefore to believe is to say Yes, not only to him, but to creation, to creatures, above all, to men, to try to see the image of God in each person and thereby to become a lover.’<sup>2</sup>*

If I accept that God is loving, and that he treasures, loves and values all his creation, then I can begin to see the world as he sees it, as well as seeing other people with his eyes. I know that he loves me, and that is good; I know that he loves you, too, so how can I withhold my love for you? If God loves you, would it not be arrogant in the extreme for me to do otherwise?

It should be clear from this that love is not an option, not just something that some people are expected to do more than others. It is essential to human

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<sup>1</sup> *Deus Caritas Est* n.39.

<sup>2</sup> J Ratzinger ‘Salt of The Earth’ An Interview with Peter Seewald Ignatius Press 1997

nature. Every one of us is by nature a lover, and when we turn our backs on that, we turn our backs on ourselves. A life without love is no life at all.

*'[W]hen we love we are fulfilling our deepest need and becoming most fully ourselves, most fully human. Loving is what we are programmed to do, what we were designed for by our Creator...to sacrifice our own preferences so as to be of service to others, to give our lives for the good of others, and above all for Jesus, who loved us and gave his life for us. That is what human beings are called to do, that is what it means to be truly alive.'*<sup>3</sup>

God is not solitary, lonely and separate; God is a Trinity, he is communion, deep in the nature of God is community, relatedness, love<sup>4</sup>. Human beings are made in his image and likeness, so we too are created for communion, for relationship, for receiving and giving love.

The more we are able to immerse ourselves in being people of love, the more human we are. But what are the characteristics of this love? How can we tell authentic love, the real thing, from the false? Speaking at World Youth Day in Australia in 2008, Pope Benedict kept returning to the theme of love, because he realizes that this is an area where young people need a great deal of support, help and guidance. On that trip he identified three 'false gods' which conspire to enslave us; they are particularly dangerous because they can look at first sight like something good, but in fact they carry within them the seeds of misery and despair. Those three false gods that people are so often misled into worshipping are material possessions, possessive love, and power<sup>5</sup>. Love properly understood is a great gift, in fact 'Without it life would hardly be worth living' but there is an imposter that imitates love and so deceives us; 'People often think they are being loving when actually they are being possessive or manipulative. People sometimes treat others as objects to satisfy their own needs rather than as persons to be loved and cherished'<sup>6</sup>.

Love is a part of our very being, although we must beware its possessive imposter. But what are the positive characteristics of this love that we have experienced in God, and which we are therefore able to offer to the world? Once again, speaking to the Youth of the World in Australia Pope Benedict called on them to be a new generation of Christians that would usher in a new age;

*'A new age in which love is not greedy or self-seeking, but pure, faithful and genuinely free, open to others, respectful of their dignity, seeking their good, radiating joy and beauty. A new age in which hope liberates us from the*

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<sup>3</sup> Meeting with a group of disadvantaged young people, Church of The Sacred Heart, Sydney, 18<sup>th</sup> July 2008

<sup>4</sup> 'God is not solitude, but perfect communion. For this reason the human person, the image of God, realizes himself or herself in love, which is a sincere gift of self.' Angelus Address, Solemnity of The Most Holy Trinity, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2005

<sup>5</sup> Meeting with a group of disadvantaged young people, Church of The Sacred Heart, Sydney, 18<sup>th</sup> July 2008

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

*shallowness, apathy and self-absorption which deaden our souls and poison our relationships*<sup>7</sup>.

No to self-absorption, yes to self-gift. I know that I am loved because I look at Christ on the cross, and his total emptying of himself shows the depth of his love. It is in the nature of human living, it is in the nature of human loving, to give myself to others. The death of Christ on the cross, which is made present once again every time we celebrate mass, makes it very clear that Christianity does not invite us to give things that we own to others, but to give ourselves to others.

*'My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a sharing of my very self with them: if my gift is not to prove a source of humiliation, I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift.'*<sup>8</sup>

Love is essentially self-gift. But this is not the end of the matter. Reflecting on 1 John 4.16: 'God is Love, and whoever abides in love remains in God and God in him', Pope Benedict observes that it is in the essence of love that it is not temporary or passing, it abides, it remains. 'Far from being indulgent or fickle, [love] has a task or purpose to fulfil: to abide. By its nature love is enduring. [W]e catch a further glimpse of how much the Holy Spirit offers our world: love which dispels uncertainty; love which overcomes the fear of betrayal; love which carries eternity within; the true love which draws us into a unity that abides!'<sup>9</sup>

Love is essential to authentic human living, and it begins with the knowledge that we ourselves are loved. True love is not possessive, but is generous in self-giving, and it is reliable and abiding. It is the source of light our world needs above all others. This is the message which Benedict, the great Apostle of Love, will bring to us next week.

*'This is the great and liberating gift which the Gospel brings: it reveals our dignity as men and women created in the image and likeness of God. It reveals humanity's divine calling, which is to find fulfillment in love.'*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Homily at Mass, Randwick Racecourse, Sydney, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2008

<sup>8</sup> Deus Caritas Est n.34

<sup>9</sup> Vigil at Randwick Racecourse, Sydney, 19<sup>th</sup> July 2008

<sup>10</sup> Homily at Mass, Randwick Racecourse, Sydney, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2008