

4th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR C

There is an essential link between faith and love. This is illustrated in a story that is told about George Herbert an English poet, priest and amateur musician. One day on his way to a music session with some friends he came upon a poor man whose horse had fallen under his load. Both man and horse were in distress and in urgent need of help.

Herbert took off his clerical robes and helped the men to unload the horse, get him on his feet, and then load him up again. Then he gave the man some money to refresh himself and his horse. That done, he set out again to keep his appointment with his friends.

Normally he kept himself very clean and trim. So when he turned up with his hands dirty and his clothes soiled, his friends were pretty surprised. When he told them what had happened and the cause of his dirtiness, one of his friends expressed disapproval that “Father” should have got himself involved in such a messy situation.

“Look”, he answered, “The thought of what I have done will be like music to me at midnight. The omission of it would have caused discord in my conscience. For I am bound to pray for all who are in distress. I am sure that I am bound so far as it is in my power to practice what I pray for. Now, let’s tune our instruments.”

In today’s Second Reading St Paul gives us what is acknowledged to be one of the best descriptions of love ever written. Love is a much-used word today. But what our culture calls love in its songs and films, frequently is not love at all. More often than not it is its opposite. It is desire and control and possessiveness.

Today a lot of people are cynical about the existence of real love. They are skeptical about the existence of goodness unsullied by self-interest. One reason is that today we have a better understanding of the complexity of human nature, and the mixed motives behind everything we do.

St Paul was well aware of the mixed motives behind what people do, He understood how people could make great sacrifices, yet those sacrifices are worthless because they are done from motives of self interest.

But he still believed in the possibility of love, and that it is central for the Christian. What he proposes in his description of love is clearly an ideal. An ideal is like a star. Though we can never reach it, it still guides us. But the main point Paul is making is the primacy of love in the life of the Christian. We must be willing to try. But we must also be willing to accept our weakness and failures without anger and frustration.

To be possessed with love is to be filled with a power which will not be denied; which will do anything, risk anything, suffer anything, endure anything, for the sake of who or what it loves.

Love, kindness, charity, doing things for others – these are the essential qualities. Love never fails. Other things fade and pass away, but love endures. If a person truly loves, he/she possesses all other virtues as well.

Faith, hope and love are the three great virtues. These remain, and the greatest of these is love. All things pass away, but the kind word, the kind deed, never pass away.