

Homily 4th Sunday of the Year © Sunday 31st January, 2010.

Mass Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19; 1 Cor 12:31-13:13; Luke 4:21-30.

Occasionally you see cartoon images of God somewhere. He's nearly always the same – elderly, bearded, up on a cloud, rather serious, either totally disapproving or totally innocuous. Perhaps this image is not meant to be taken seriously, but it's pretty popular. You would never, for example, see an image of God as a couple of young lovers kissing in the park, or in the ecstatic mayhem of a team after just scoring a goal; neither probably would you see an image of God in the silent and lonely tragedy of the bereaved or the face of an abandoned or abused child. Some have a somewhat safe and predictable association with God. Whenever I listen to secularists dismissing the God we believe in I always hear them rejecting some manic despot that I don't believe in either. They denounce the god they say we believe in, but they say nothing of the true God whom we have come to know because they obviously have never met Him – although He knows them of course. It can often be somewhat safer to know about someone rather than to know them. Secularists usually choose this safety. Mind you, so do some Christians!

Knowing about something or someone leaves a margin of escape and allows you to be a spectator. Knowing implies vulnerability and surrender. It happens sometimes that as people move higher in society they change their friends, develop liaisons with those whom it's good to be seen to be with, and some of their former less glamorous friends they forget. For many there's a huge difference between knowing about prostitutes, prisoners, gays, the homeless, addicts, the mentally ill, than having them as personal friends. Knowing about people leaves room for escape, it provides protection from too close an association. Jesus takes us on the journey from knowing about God to knowing God. Jesus shows us the true face of God. He takes us on the path also of coming to experience how deeply we are known by God. Jesus lives and reveals for us the depth of the words of His Father to the prophet Jeremiah: *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.”* (Jer 1:5) Not, ‘before I formed you in the womb I knew about you,’ but ‘I knew you.’ Before you knew anything about anything I knew you. Jesus wants to take you and me into that. Jesus has a vulnerability towards each one of us personally, and a surrendering. It is what His life, and His cross particularly, say to us. To know about us implies a distance from us. To know us means for Him to have put Himself into our hands. “I am close, very close and want to be closer,” He says. “I made you to be mine.” He says this to you now.

“Master how do you know me?” Nathanael asks Jesus – you remember. (John 1:48ff)

“Before Philip ever called you Nathanael, I saw you.” With His eyes - or with His soul?

“Not one sparrow falls to the ground without your Father knowing it – aren't you worth more to Him than hundreds of sparrows?” (Matthew 10:29) This isn't knowing about, but knowing from within; seeing from the heart. Next time you see a sparrow remember that, if it fell, God would know the reverberation in Himself, and you aren't listened to? You cannot love, truly love, deeply love from a distance. The journey we are on, you and me, is exploring the intimacy of God. It's why we are in this world; it's why we are at this Mass. It isn't an easy journey. However, it's our most real and only journey.

“This is Joseph’s son, surely?” We know Him; meaning we know all about Him. “He grew up here. As a boy He used to hang around with our kids. If He wants to be the great physician, God knows we have enough sick people and cripples in Nazareth without Him being the super hero somewhere else.” You can imagine it can’t you. It’s understandable. What He’s got we want for ourselves, He owes it to us first, after all we know Him don’t we – this is Joseph’s son *surely*. We are sure aren’t we? They may have been but they were mistaken. Having certainty and knowing the truth is not necessarily the same thing at all is it? This is Joseph’s son? No, He isn’t. They only knew about Him, a bit. Him they didn’t know, and now is the time for them to begin to because in coming to know who He really is they will come to know who they truly are, which is why He came. *“We have heard all that happened in Capernaum.”* Capernaum was considered to be even more of a dump than Nazareth; a seaside port crawling with cut throats and thieves, but much more to the point – with gentiles; the uncircumcised pagans. Living where they did, the Jews of Capernaum were far more involved with their gentile neighbours than were the strict-living Jews of Nazareth, who preferred to live apart in the remote hill country of Galilee. Jesus had moved from Nazareth to Capernaum, and placed His life and ministry in the prophetic tradition of Elijah and Elisha, who both ministered to gentiles, who went out to them, who showed a preference for them. We have to understand that Israel is under military occupation by these people to whom Jesus is expressing a preference. You can see the problems.

What Jesus said by His proclamation of good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, sight for the blind, release for the oppressed that He began His homily with in the synagogue in Nazareth, that we heard of last week, was fine until He referred to the breadth of His mission, to where He has been, where He has been living, to whom He has been preaching, whom He has been touching, freeing, healing, with whom He has been sharing meals and friendship. Jesus wants them to listen to Him from a place they have never been nor ever wish to go – from the wounds of the gentiles, from their blindness and captivity also. *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.”* That, He is saying, has been said not only to Jews but to all, and He is the proclamation of it. They didn’t want this. The Messiah is the One who makes Jerusalem and Israel, and the Covenant, a home for all nations, all people. *“Whoever comes to me I shall not turn him away.”* (John 6:35-37) The fulfilment of the Jewish Law and Prophetic teaching He is saying is that Israel is called to be as big, as open, as warm, as loving as the heart of her husband, her lover, her shepherd, her God. This they must do by moving from knowing about God to knowing Him, who He really is, and the surest way of doing that is to let oneself simply be known by Him – to let Him in. *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I would have loved to gather you to me even as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you refused.”* (Luke 19:41-42) And He cried - it broke His heart and ended His life. And His mission He has now entrusted to us, to you and me, here and now, today, this week, and until we die.

To pray to the Sacred Heart means to have your heart enlarged – to be as big as Jesus’ heart. That means it must be broken, (like the bread of the Eucharist) not once but many times, and that hurts. But it’s what the world needs from the Church. It’s why the Church is here

So we are to be like Him, personally, and as the Church. We share in His anointing. *“The spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me.”* (Luke 4:18) Every single baptised and confirmed Christian can say the same. We have been anointed with chrism to be both personally and communally the home for all peoples.

We have been anointed to undertake a journey too. Jesus invited that congregation in the synagogue that Sabbath day to enter upon the journey of listening to the God who has placed Himself deep within everyone saying, *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.”* To know Him means to listen to Him from the wounds and dreams and longings of others, whoever they are. I must listen to Him from within the wounds, dreams and longings that are my own too; hearing Him say to me, *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.”* This is what He is saying to you in this synagogue, at this gathering, on this Sabbath day.

How best to do this?

Paul writes to us: *“I will show you a way that is the best way of all:”*

Take the second reading and instead of the word ‘Love’ put your own name.

N is always patient and kind

N is never jealous

N is never boastful or conceited

N is never rude or selfish

N does not take offence

N is not resentful

N takes no pleasure in other people’s sins

N delights in the truth

N is always ready to excuse

N is always ready to trust

N is always ready to hope

N is always ready to endure whatever comes

That’s the real journey.

That’s the way I am known, and therefore will come myself to know - and know myself.

May God bless each one of us in it.