

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday C 2010

Rev. Robert VerEecke, S.J.

The last time I heard these readings for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the year C I was in Jamaica at our sister parish, St Anne's. That was three years ago since we are on a three year cycle of readings. When I remembered that I had to hear the word of God and try to preach on these readings in that specific context which is one of the poorest and most violent areas of the city of Kingston—yet one which has a vibrant faith community—I thought about what a difference the time and the place and the life context makes for hearing the word of God. It makes such a difference for the preaching, interpreting, and connecting the word of God with the lived experience of a people. The way we hear the word of God in Chestnut Hill in the parish of St Ignatius is much different than it is for a people whose daily lives are challenged by extremely poor living conditions and the threat of violence.

Today's gospel continues last week's when Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah and says it is he who has come to fulfill the promise "to bring good news to the poor and release to the prisoners." Imagine what it must be like to be in a context where you are imprisoned by poverty and violence and hear the promise that God's kingdom is breaking into your lives, that God is indeed hearing your cries and Jesus is the way in which this is happening. Think of the people of Haiti who are experiencing such terrible loss these days. We can't even begin to imagine the suffering of this people. How are they hearing the word of God today that speaks of love and the promise of God's kingdom? From what we hear, the faith of this people who have so little is remarkably strong.

What I preached from these readings three years ago, I told the people a story that I am about to tell you. Living in a context where revenge and hatred hold sway, where lines are drawn between different turf/ gangs/ and where anyone can fall victim to violence, I wanted to focus on the readings from Corinthians about love.

Now I have to be honest, doing as many weddings as I have performed in my 30 years as a priest, when someone gets up to read... love is patient, love is kind: I'm not listening. I tune the reading out. I don't listen anymore since I've heard it so often. If you go to lots of weddings you know what I mean. These beautiful words of St Paul become a kind of elevator music. It's in the

background. It's kind of soothing but you don't really pay attention. It doesn't grab you. These words of St Paul that are meant to be shocking, earth shaking, life changing come across as a kind of "pabulum," a pacifier, rather than a challenge to live a radical love (this may be similar to what got Jesus in trouble in the Gospel. People wanted to hear the same old, same old and he was saying something radically different about God's intervention in the world through him.)

Given the challenging context in which the parishioners of St Anne's live, I knew that I couldn't preach "pretty words." So I told them a story about love that actually happened here in Chestnut Hill. About 4 or 5 years ago, one of our parishioners lost her daughter in a terrible car accident. Her daughter, who was in her twenties, had wonderful hopes and dreams for the future and was going to London to study international relations so she could help the poor, was walking along Hammond Street. A driver lost control of the car and hit Anna, sending her in the air. She was taken to the hospital where her mother happened to be a physician. After she had seen her daughter, one of the first things she asked was if the driver of the car was ok. That's the kind of person she was. Anna died soon after and I was asked to preach for her funeral. I was stunned when her mother got up to read Paul's letter to the Corinthians. The one we just heard. I had never heard it in the same way. Here was a mother who had lost her beloved daughter, who could have been filled with grief and rage and she was speaking about love as patient, kind, bearing all things. I will never forget those words because they were spoken by someone who knew the cost of loving at all costs.

So I told this story of a mother and daughter in Jamaica to many who had lost children to violent deaths. A story of love that is not romantic, not pretty but one that is the story of Jesus who knew the cost of loving at all costs.