

Homily for 9th Sunday (A), March 6, 2011. Fr. Joseph T. Nolan

It is not words alone that will win us salvation, but words followed up by deeds. These aren't my thoughts, they are the Lord's-- you just heard them. Take three words which are among the most precious in any language: I LOVE YOU. When we say them to God or to Jesus in prayer, we are reminded by the apostle John that *God has loved us first*. That is a tremendous statement; it means that our first stance towards God should be one of gratitude because we are loved and given such extraordinary gifts as life itself. The Mass is called thanksgiving—eucharist – for God's greatest gift to us, his own son. And Jesus, to put his whole message simply, teaches how to live. And love.

So many of the gospels are examples of loving – as Jesus did, and we should. He loved sinners and forgave them—he did not condemn the woman taken in adultery but told her to go in peace and sin no more. He enjoyed banquets and parties – Matthew threw a big one and Jesus brought his whole crowd. He loved a good time – remember the wine of Cana. He was patient with sinners - the prodigal son who flung away his inheritance in what we sum up as wine, women, and song – the father, you remember, forgave the son and welcomed him home. The father, of course, is meant to remind us of God who loves us—we who are often his wayward children. Jesus thought well of people he was supposed to hate--the Samaritans were hostile to the Hebrews and yet Jesus made a Samaritan the hero of his greatest story. He showed incredible patience with the Samaritan woman at the well. In a chaste sense Jesus loved women. Mary Magdalen, the first to meet him in his risen life. He loved his own mother, of course, as all of us do. And remember what the gospel says of the two sisters, Mary and Martha – they, along with Lazarus their brother, were his friends.

We love each other, or at least we say we do. What does the love require for proof, taking our cue again from Jesus and the gospels? Love is committed to help, to serve, to minister to one another as parents do every day, preparing a home and so much more for their children. Blessed are you who are parents, because you are called to sacrificial love, the highest kind that seeks the good of another.

And the love expressed with the body actually creates new life, the greatest of all mysteries, the child in your arms, the boy or girl who will go on to become president, of course. The gospel seems to disparage words or at least

words without deeds. But think of the words Jesus spoke at the Last Supper when he said of bread, “this is my body” and of wine, “this is my blood. Take, eat, drink.” Three gospels repeat them, and so do we, in every Mass. But you do not find them in John’s gospel; instead Jesus washes their feet, and then tells them quite plainly, “I am midst of you as one who serves.”

If we need reinforcements for these thoughts, turn to John again, his famous first letter: “If you do not love your neighbor whom you can see, how then can you love the God you cannot see?” And James writes, “If you have this world’s goods and do not share them with your neighbor in need, how can you say you say the love of God is in you?”

Love can demand very much. Here is an example from the great novel of the first World War, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. It was, as some of you know, about seven German youths who leave school behind to become soldiers and are soon sent to combat. The whole point of the novel is that they are humans like us. The seven are caught up in the hell of trench warfare and one by one they are killed. The first, who is terribly wounded, is taken to a field hospital where the doctors amputate his leg. But he doesn’t know this – remember that, nor does he know the dread knowledge which the doctor tells his friends – they could not contain the infection and he will die. His comrades had expected him to recover, and even brought his most prized possession – soft leather English boots. He asked for them and said “I’ll be wearing them soon.” They mutter, “Wouldn’t you like us to keep them for you?” No, he wants them nearby for the time (which will never come) when he will walk again. Reluctantly they leave them and say goodbye. You can’t blame their hesitation – they loved their friend but they also knew that when he died the thieving orderlies would take them. What the dying man really needed was the unselfish love of comrades who valued him and his peace of mind more than his boots.

But that’s heroic love--the kind St. Paul writes about in the greatest passage of the New Testament: “love that sustains, believes, hopes, endures to the last.”

To give an example of how universal myths are in religion, consider this intriguing story from the Native American tradition, their version of what we call Genesis 1 and 2 . It goes like this: “Old Man and Old Woman had just finished creating the world, and the man. And now they had to decide whether or not the man should die. Old Man said to Old Woman, ‘Let us throw a buffalo chip on the water, and if it is still floating after four days, the man shall not die.’ So they did as he said, and the four days passed. The chip sank, and they decided the man would die. Later on, Old Man and Old Woman had a child. And Old Woman said, ‘I have changed my mind. I

want the man to live.’ But Old Man answered, ‘It is too late. We have spoken.’”

If you think it is a fairly ridiculous story – a buffalo chip on the water – just think of our own myth of the fall of the man, which employs a talking snake! These are good stories, they are meant to capture the imagination. Also, remember, to convey a deep truth. The more one thinks of this tale, the more one can be struck by the rebellion against death that rises in every human because of love. Not just love of life, but of each other. When they had a child, it made all the difference. I am more convinced that, of all the arguments for life beyond death, along with the appearances of the Risen Christ embodying this new creation, the love we have experienced is a clue – that the Creator continues the gift of life in ways we find difficult to imagine. Two biblical statements come to mind: one from the Song of Songs: love is stronger than death; the other, from St. Paul, love wins the victory. In the end we need to heed Jesus’ words: what is needed is trust.

(and a better image or use of metaphor/)