

## Quinquagesima, 11<sup>th</sup> February 2018

One passage of the Scriptures that most people have probably heard being read in church is the thirteenth chapter of St Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. It isn't hard to see why it is so popular at weddings: it is surely the perfect hymn to 'love'. It is as such pure poetry and a delight for anyone to listen to: "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and I have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal" (1 Co 13:1). This opening verse in fact contains a few important indications for our understanding of St Paul's poem.

If you continue and read through the whole of chapter thirteen, you will find no reference to Christ or even to God. Indeed, the only specifically religious reference is perhaps in that very first verse: "the tongues [...] of angels", and then again "angels" have become such a popular spiritual idea in the minds of many in our society. Is it no wonder, therefore, that this passage of Scripture is so well-known and so well-liked?!

It is not just that this reading can be taken in a generally secular (and as such inoffensive) sense, but the whole notion of 'love' can be read in this secular sense; that is why the Douay-Rheims version, already quoted, helps to clarify things for us with its use of "charity" rather than 'love': "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and I have not charity [...]" (1 Co 13:1). The word "charity" is as such a faithful reproduction of the Latin *caritas*, which itself is the exact equivalent of a Greek word you may have heard of: ἀγάπη (*agape*).

This *agape*, "charity", is by definition an unconditional and self-sacrificing 'love'. Pope Benedict XVI began his first encyclical with the following words from St John's first epistle: *Deus caritas est* ("God is charity", 1 Jn 4:8). That indeed helps to make sense of St Paul. God is not mentioned explicitly in today's Epistle precisely because he himself is to be understood as "charity": "Charity is patient, is kind [...] Charity never falleth away" (1 Co 13:4, 8).

In his encyclical, Pope Benedict goes on to list the other Greek words, apart from *agape*, for 'love': *eros* (namely, a possessive love) and *philia* (the love between friends). Perhaps people at a wedding, given the occasion, are prone to imagine the 'love' celebrated in St Paul's epistle in terms of that second meaning, *eros*: a romantic 'love', and for many the essential type of 'love' (next Wednesday, 14<sup>th</sup> February, is proof of that – and I'm not talking here of Ash Wednesday!).

This second type of ‘love’ is, however, sandwiched between the more mundane ‘love’, which is friendship, and the higher and more spiritual charity. The actual reality and nitty-gritty of married life no doubt, one way or another, requires all three types of ‘love’. Pope Benedict in fact argues that all of them are also present in God, though *agape* has obvious proud of place, since God is *agape: Deus caritas est*. And, just as St Paul tells us right at the very end of chapter thirteen, charity is not only the most important ‘love’; it is also so in respect to faith and hope: “there remain faith, hope and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity” (1 Co 13:13).

Yet just as we should not necessarily disregard the other forms of ‘love’, *eros* and *philia*; so it would be truly foolish, in view of charity, to disregard the virtues of faith and hope. As it happens, we can observe the relationship between faith and charity in today’s Gospel. The blind man cries out by the side of the road: “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me” (Lk 18:38); he is as such imploring Christ’s charity, but in a spirit of faith: he believes in the charity, the “mercy” of Christ. And he is duly rewarded for such faith: “Jesus said to him: ‘Receive thy sight, thy faith hath made thee whole’” (Lk 18:42).

We could say that faith in Christ’s charity was the means by which the blind man received his sight; yet surely the charity itself was more significant, constituting the very object to which his faith was directed. In a few moments time, we will start singing the Creed. We begin it, naturally enough, with an act of faith, “*Credo in unum Deum* (I believe in one God)”, though we end it with an act of hope: “*Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum. Et vitam venturi saeculi* (And I await the resurrection of the dead. And the life of the world to come)”. And what is it that we believe in again? – “God”. And God is ...? (Think of an encyclical by Pope Benedict) – “charity”!

The Creed of course expands upon this belief in God and affirms that the Son of God became man, whose charity finds expression in his being “crucified also for us” etc. Christ had spoken beforehand, in today’s Gospel, about it to the twelve, discreetly speaking of himself in the third person as the Son of Man: “he shall be delivered to the Gentiles, and shall be mocked and scourged and spit upon: and after they have scourged him, they will put him to death, and the third day he shall rise again” (Lk 18:32-33).

This is the love, the charity, which we believe and hope in; the charity and mercy of Christ, which the blind man also would believe and hope in. May we, like him, then have the courage to jump up from the sidelines, from where we were sitting, and follow the Lord along the road to Jericho and Jerusalem, to Holy Week, to Easter, and beyond.