

THE GREATEST SICKNESS IN OUR SOCIETY

Numbers 21: 4-9; John 3: 1-17

"For God so loved the world..." God and love, love and God... that's what we talk about in church, a lot. Sometimes we can get a little weary of it all, can't we? Sometimes such talk loses its ability to compel and convict. I mean, it's easy to become cynical, complacent, apathetic even. When you hear about something too much it becomes a platitude - something lacking in its ability to motivate, awaken, arouse and inspire.

But let me suggest that this is exactly our problem in society, our sickness. If you asked most people what our biggest problem in society is, you'd get different answers. But maybe near the top of the list would be something like "hate"? Think about all the division, polarization and conflict in our world right now. Think about all the racial and nationalist tension, the threat of attack due to terrorism or white nationalism or the proliferation of guns and drugs and war. It's hard to think of a bigger problem than hate as basic fuel behind it all.

But ancient peoples had a different view. Behind hate and behind many other toxic attitudes and behaviours in our world they discerned something even more sinister – indifference. According to the philosopher Plato, if love of the good or God was the highest value for human beings, the opposite of such love was not hate. The opposite of love was indifference? But what is indifference? Indifference is: a lack of caring, apathy, the inability to feel, to desire, to be passionate about anything, to commit to anything or feel responsible for something, a weariness with living, a fatigue, an inner numbness and emptiness. To feel hate is to be passionate about something, and if one is passionate one can be confronted, held responsible and accountable in some way, re-directed in one's energy. But to be indifferent, to lack a sense of caring, to lack feeling, energy, motivation ... how do we engage that?

"For God so loved the world." Jesus encounters a teacher of the law, a Pharisee. He wants to understand what Jesus is about. Jesus tells him that it's not enough to learn about God and know the rules. It's not enough to be born and grow up in an ordinary, biological way. One must be transformed within. God has planted a seed in each and every one of us, a seed that must grow. That seed is love. To be converted to love as God loves, that's what being born from above is all about. It's about being watered by God, exposed to the sunlight, the inspiration and passionate influence that is God. That's what can grow real love in us. The ability to care, to weep, to be motivated, energized and engaged by the world around us and its needs, and to trust that such engagement, such concern and such passion will not decimate us but give us life: that's what God hopes for each and every one of us.

But alas, we live in a world where love is threatened. Certainly hate is a threat to love. But even more so I want to argue, the most sinister enemy of love is not hate, but indifference. A person who hates loves something, even if the love is flawed. A

person who hates lives out of hurt, betrayal, a sense of grievance, injustice, loss, grief. If the person didn't care they wouldn't have all that energy turned in a hateful direction. Indifference, on the other hand, is like death. There is no feeling. How do you awaken love when there's no energy or passion?

Well, ancient teachers were much more aware of the problem of indifference than some modern therapies are. The ancient world developed a special word for indifference: "*Acedia*." *Acedia* was thought to be so sinister a problem that it was identified as a sin, as the working of the demonic, as the seedbed of all kinds of disastrous consequences in human life.

Here are some broad descriptions of *Acedia*:

- apathy, indifference, an inability to care, numbness of feeling;
- inability to weep, to be passionate, to desire anything deeply;
- boredom, restlessness that can turn violent, lust, greed, discontent;
- low expectations, low aims and goals;
- unwillingness to make commitments, to take on responsibility.
- inability to concentrate, constantly distracted;
- tiredness, fatigue, lack of energy and motivation;
- despair, cynicism, fatalism.

Here are some more descriptions by writers, poets and thinkers:

[*Acedia*] is the sin that believes nothing, cares to know nothing, seeks to know nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing... and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die. (Dorothy Sayers)

Aren't you tired, as I am, of waking up every morning and seeing the sun again? Tired of living the same life, of suffering the same pain? Tired of desiring and tired of being disgusted? Tired of waiting and tired of possessing? (Gustave Flaubert)

What is it like, this failure in the art of life? It is the failure which manifests itself in a loss of interest in really important things... There is nothing dramatic about it, and thus it works with a dreadful advantage; it creeps up on us, and once it has us in its grip, it is hard for us to recognize what ails us... But if... your feelings and sensibilities are withering, if your relationships with people near to you are becoming more and more superficial, if you are losing touch even with yourself, it is *Acedia* which has claimed you for its own. (Robertson Davies)

The *acediac* is a person without commitment, who lives in a world characterized by mobility, passive entertainment, self-indulgence... Sometimes *acedia* is identified with sloth or laziness, but that is only the external face of an attitude marked by chronic withdrawal from reality into the more comfortable zone of uncommitted and free-floating fantasy. (Michael Casey)

Many have identified the condition of *acedia* with a lot of random acts of violence and sexual perversion in our society. A youth walks into a college and starts shooting randomly at people, killing many and then killing himself. He may offer written hints as to why, a pretext of hate for the focus of his killing. But too

often, such acts of violence come out of a situation where there is meaningless boredom, a lack of center, purpose and passion in things that really matter. Video games, entertainment, addictions of all kinds, pornography – such things cannot provide positive direction and meaning to life. They can't fill the void of real purpose. Over time people lose any capacity to care, to feel, to understand, to form relationships that matter, connections of depth and concern with the world around them. Such is the sickness, large and small that is afflicting our society, and we are part of it in some measure. As the great writer George Bernanos wrote: "The world is eaten up by boredom... You can't see it all at once. It is like dust. You go about and never notice... But stand still for an instant and there it is, coating your face and hands. To shake off this drizzle of ashes you must be forever on the go. And so people are always "on the go.""

Modern psychology would diagnose any of these states of being as derivatives of clinical depression or ADHD, or some other condition. And how does one treat such conditions? Counseling will help. But the bigger focus is medication. The positives of medication is that it can make a difference, sometimes a big difference. However, as some recent studies have shown, not only is medication over-prescribed, but it has less success than many believe it does, and in fact, taking such medication over a long period of time, without any other qualitative change in a person's life, will have a declining benefit. Some of us know this all too well from our personal experience or in our accompaniment of others.

The superiority of modern psychology to more ancient therapeutic traditions is in discerning that depression, ADHD, OCD, or other conditions are legitimate illnesses like any other illness. A person suffering from one or another such condition shouldn't be blamed for it. They should be treated with compassion and should be supported in whatever therapy may help to overcome, or at least, manage the condition.

The weakness of modern psychology, however, is that it does not recognize the category of sin, and therefore, how primal it is that people be energized and empowered to take responsibility for choices that must be made and practices that have to be taken up to overcome or manage *acedia*. Unless someone takes responsibility for a condition, chances are the condition will not be overcome. Taking responsibility means we recognize that we can and should do something about the matter ourselves. We can't just rely on outside sources of help. We are not just passive victims. It's about finding resources to take charge of something, find a path and walk it, even if it will involve hard work. In fact, the harder the work, the more lasting the change will be.

Now we can't have the same expectations of children as we can of adults. However, we have to discover again and again, that healing is not just about medication. And too often, we capitulate too easily to categories like depression or ADHD or something else. It doesn't always do justice to people who really suffer from such conditions. Many of us may have symptoms that feel the same, but just telling ourselves or others that we are depressed can be a copout. Just accepting that we are stressed and that's why we are restless, anxious and unable to concentrate is no excuse to be passive about it. Just asserting that we have too much to worry about to care about what's going on in the news or in other

peoples' lives is not a legitimate excuse. Responsibility must be taken, choices have to be made, and practices have to be taken up that will help change our lives.

In our Old Testament reading, we are told that the people of Israel were suffering from a form of *acedia*. They were on a long journey and they were impatient, hungry, thirsty and full of misery and complaint. Whatever Moses did, made little difference. But then they fell upon poisonous snakes and many got sick. Some died. This woke them up out of their miserable state of negativity and impatience. They went down on their knees, regretted their negativity and prayed for healing. God responded to their awakened initiative out of desperation. And their healing came in the form of a snake Moses makes out of bronze, set on a pole. The serpent on a pole is our modern symbol for medicine. People focused on the serpent, they concentrated their gaze upon it. This led them to experience healing. Their faith made them well and it was focused on something concrete. And this is the image Jesus refers to in our gospel reading. He identifies himself with that bronze serpent. Those who follow Christ to find their life purpose, those who believe in him and open themselves to receive him as inner energy, will be on a healing journey. Their hearts will be transformed to love like God loves.

And that's what we need most, is it not? One suffering from *acedia* in one form or another needs to be awakened to love, to the passion and purpose, the focus, the depth and riches, the beauty, the generosity, motivation and energy that grows out of love. And here are some practices that can help restore such energy when we are caught in the grips of *acedia*. Ancient teachers recommend a combination of practices:

Practical: Good diet, good sleep, good physical activity. Develop a good rhythm to your life and follow it even when you don't feel like it.

Social: Get involved with others, don't cocoon yourself or isolate yourself in your own needs and issues. Get involved, commit yourself to something involving the wider world or community and stick with it even when you don't feel like being with people.

Spiritual: Prayer, meditation, worship on a regular basis, exposure to beauty, to the suffering of others non-judgmentally, to music and art... integrate such practices regularly in your week and your life, and stick with it even when life is hectic or hard.

Acedia is an illness, and when it is serious it can kill your spirit. Indifference isn't something we can shake off in a moment. But we can find assurance that God has not made us this way. God has made us to be alive through love. Christ has called us to follow him in love. It will cost us, and for some of us, the cost will be great, the struggle deep, the pain immense. It can hurt to care and to invest in life with others and concern for our world. Yet the rewards are much greater than the hurt, for we will be living life fully, abundantly, richly and deeply, with greater peace. Is this not worth it? Amen.

Prayer: Energize me, and ground me, O God, with your fire of love... Amen.