

## TRUE LOVE

Mark 5: 21-43, 1 Corinthians 13

We have heard it read many times before. The famous 'Hymn to Love' as it has been called, is a compelling statement about love, inspired by the apostle Paul's struggle with the Corinthian Christians. Against their false concerns and priorities, the apostle establishes in clear language, the true priority of the gospel. Those who have love and those who really reflect love in their lives, offer the greater testimony to Christ's life-giving power.

But isn't it true that words we hear too many times can fade in their capacity to persuade us? Isn't it true that these words, for all their lofty and beautiful conceptuality about love, can seem abstract when measured against the real-life challenges we all face day to day? I mean, certainly we can all agree that love ought to be patient and kind. And on good days we may even feel good about ourselves being patient and kind toward those around us. But what about those days and those situations when patience and kindness are incredibly difficult? What about those circumstances that bring out feelings and attitudes contrary to love, attitudes and feelings of envy, arrogance, resentment and a push for control? What about those relationships that can trigger in us suspicion, mistrust, cynicism, anger or despair? Indeed, love is a great thing to strive after, but the particularities of life can discourage us all too often from believing ourselves stellar representatives of love.

But maybe, we need to re-frame the problem. Maybe we need to rethink a way into the question. What is love and how does it take concrete root in our lives? Here we may learn more from the gospels, than from any other source, and especially in the testimony of Jesus himself. How did Jesus demonstrate love, not in words but in the living out of his life? How did the gospel of God's love take flesh in his personhood?

Let me suggest two things, two things which we will flesh out through our gospel reading. The first is that Jesus was willing and ready to be interrupted. The second is that Jesus had an incredibly developed capacity for concentration. Thus, whether it was in his willingness to be interrupted or his capacity to concentrate, Jesus exercised an amazing ability to love, the kind of love that changed people.

Now before we consider our gospel reading again from the lens of this twin perspective on love, let us try to understand what these words may mean for us: being interrupted on the one hand and concentrating on the other. Being interrupted may have negative connotations for us, connotations of frustration and irritation. Who wants to be interrupted, especially when one is engaged in important things? The image that comes to mind for me is that of a young parent, totally taken up by the needs, concerns and demands of their infant child. Feeding, changing soiled diapers, comforting, cleaning,

settling them down or picking them up.... the total opposite of having time to focus on oneself.

The parent can have no agenda at these times other than the constant needs and demands of this vulnerable young life, totally dependent on a parent's care and attention. Now that I am past the worst of this kind of life, I smile with sympathy when I see young parents with dishevelled clothing and hair, blood-shot eyes, frazzled dispositions, worn features... welcome to the joy of parenthood, I say!

Now when we think about concentration, we usually associate this with more positive images. But then again, some of the most intense forms of concentration can shut out the rest of the world in a way that can be unnerving. Many of us can imagine the image of two, awe-struck lovers totally enraptured with each other, noticing every smell, pore, freckle, mannerism and shade of emotion in the beloved. Or we may think of the now-more-familiar image of the autistic savant who can shut out the world and concentrate on something like a mathematical problem or a bar of music or a set of words on a page, so much so that they may see and perceive things the rest of us would totally miss. Or else, in a more destructive sense, we may think of so many in our society who struggle with some kind of obsessive-compulsive disorder, where they concentrate on every detail of some bodily feature or their environment, so much so, that they cannot function without severe damage to themselves, their ability to work or to get things done. Thus, whether it is interruption or concentration, we need to keep in mind that these words are not necessarily positive ones for some people.

On the other hand, when we think of love and the particularity of how love works itself out in life, interruption and concentration may be very illuminating words to describe it. And in order to flesh this out a little bit, let us consider the person of Jesus depicted in our gospel reading. Here we meet Jesus in the midst of a large crowd clamouring for his attention, demanding his healing power, and hoping for some sign of God's new day for them and their nation. And even though the gospels portray Jesus as someone with a plan, a mission and a destiny, in many of the stories, Jesus is in a state of constant interruption and constant refocusing of his concentration. Consider the two incidents in our reading.

First there is the needs of Jairus, a synagogue leader and prominent citizen of the Jewish community. How Jesus could have heard him in the midst of all those people clamouring for his attention is a mystery to me. And yet he did. Whatever he had planned to do, Jesus was ready to be interrupted when he heard this man's story of pain and imminent loss. His daughter was dying and he was desperate. Yes, many of the Jewish leaders were highly suspicious of Jesus and wanted to undermine his popularity. But right now, Jairus couldn't care less about all that. What he needed and wanted was for Jesus to use his healing power on his daughter. He would be eternally grateful. Who knows what Jesus' plans were for that day, where he planned to go, what he planned to accomplish. Right then and right

there, he was going to change them. This man's needs took priority, and somehow, at the end of it all, Jesus knew and trusted that it would all be incorporated into something bigger and more worthwhile and his own plans for the day.

But the interruptions only continue, for on his way to Jairus' house, Jesus feels something has happened to him. Some energy has been drawn out of him. Someone must have touched him, trusting his healing power and offering a little prayer as they did so. Jesus doesn't just ignore this and keep going, trying to salvage something of his botched plans for the day. No. He stops and he enquires among the crowd for who it is that has touched him. He senses there is something yet to be finished in this action. Slowly, out of the crowd, a woman comes forward, a woman who has been suffering menstrual haemorrhages for years. Jesus acknowledges her, affirms her action taken in faith, and dismisses her in peace.

Now if this isn't enough of an interruption already, at the very moment the woman departs the scene and the crowd resumes its shuffling, people come running from the direction of Jairus' house. 'Forget it, it's too late,' they say. 'Your daughter is dead.' What an emotional nightmare for Jesus to be part of! How is he going to deal with this one? Of course, we know how the story ends, but we can never take for granted the process Jesus undergoes to get there. Love as a constant willingness to be interrupted... I don't know about you, but for me this is an incredible challenge at the best of times.

But we can also read this same set of stories from the perspective of love as concentration, can we not? Another word for concentration is paying attention. Jesus pays attention, he concentrates on people, their needs and concerns, and then he applies himself in an intensely focussed way on some pro-active presence and action.

Not only does he hear Jairus' pain and respond; not only does he notice that someone has touched him and then focus his attention on the woman and her story of pain, but Jesus shuts out the wailing and the noise around him in order to focus his concentration on a 12-year-old girl in desperate need of resuscitation. We are told that Jesus sends everyone out of her room except her parents. He takes the girl's hand; he feels the life in it. He speaks to her tender words which are given to us in Aramaic: 'Talitha cum', 'Little girl, get up!' Can you imagine how intense this scene is? How can Jesus switch from all this public interaction with the crowds, shut the world out and just focus on this young child with the fragile life in her held in the balance?

Again, I don't know about you but I can have a really difficult time concentrating on a particular person when I am in the midst of a whirlwind in my life or my surroundings. It takes an amazing kind of love to be able to switch focus in this way and give the kind of listening attention and concentration on other people, the kind of concentration that breathes life into them. You see, in such a busy and restless world as we live in, it is really rare for people to feel truly heard and concentrated upon. Thus, whenever it happens, it is

healing grace. People can feel resurrected in spirit even when there is no immediate or obvious resolution to their problems or concerns. The fact is someone has taken them seriously. Someone has cared enough and been interested enough to hear them out, to invest some emotion and feeling, some concern upon them and their situation. Never underestimate the power of healing presence that you can exercise by concentrated and engaged listening!

Thus, even though we can often think of love in abstract or sentimental ways, true love has teeth to it. When we look at the Jesus of the gospels, the revelation of God's love to us as a challenge and an invitation, we see some real concrete ways to be inspired in our own living. We see concrete attributes and ways of being we can pray to acquire more fully. The willingness to be interrupted; the developed capacity to concentrate; these are attributes into which each and every one of us can grow. As we have begun summer and we focus on what we'd like to do and where we'd like to go, may we pay attention to the interruptions that may demand something of our time and focus. God is calling to us through them... the Spirit of Jesus is moving in the midst of them...

Amen.