

‘By this love you have for one another everyone will know that you are my disciples!’ This suggests that the love the disciples received from Jesus and which they showed to one other was different from any popular love; it had its own characteristics and therefore when they showed Jesus’ love people could recognise that they were different, they were His disciples. Today Jesus challenges us to love in His way, to be different, instead of conforming our love to what the secularist media and people suggest: a love which is based on the individual’s ability to love, and doesn’t have anything to do with a personal relationship with Christ. Even Christians today say that the most important thing is that you don’t hurt others and just try to be good to others. Now Jesus challenges us to go beyond that when He says: Love one another as I have loved you (John 13: 34-35 and 15:12).

So how is Jesus’ love different from popular or mere human love? C. S. Lewis, the famous Catholic writer normally distinguishes four forms of love: charity, storge, philia and eros. Eros is romantic love, or being in love with someone, such as the intimate love between husbands and wives and between lovers. Philia refers to love between friends who love each other almost like siblings. Storge refers to the affection and natural love that is between parents and their children, and this is the kind of love which is very close to charity, which is divine or unconditional love. If you check the original ancient Greek text of today’s Gospel reading Jesus uses the word *charity* when he tells His disciples how he loved them and how they should love each another.

So what is *charity*, or divine love like? Most recently I experienced it very vividly during the last session of our Lent retreat [here] at Sacred Heart, when I was blessing those who came along. I felt very close to God the Father as He was pouring out His blessings through my words and through the laying on of hands over the participants of the retreat. I felt hugely energised, peaceful and fulfilled spiritually and I sensed His presence very clearly, as if He was speaking through my words, and I could see that most participants also sensed this very special moment of the Father’s closeness to them. Charity has much similarity with a natural parental love, but charity goes beyond natural parental love; it is supernatural, it is divine love. While parental love is unconditional towards family members only, charity is unconditional towards everyone, including our enemies, which really distinguishes those who love with charity; ie. with the heavenly Father’s love. Jesus says in Mt 5:44-47 (NIV): ‘⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be

children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?’

Jesus loved the disciples with charity, ie. with the heavenly Father’s love. Did you notice that in this Gospel reading Jesus called the disciples ‘My little CHILDREN.’ This is one of those rare occasions when it is so wonderful to see how united Jesus and the heavenly Father are in their eternal bond of love, and that when you see the Son you see the Father (cf. John 14:9), and they are one not only in good times, but in very difficult times as well. Since they are so completely one they glorify one another; in other words they show each other’s love in every circumstances. Notice what Jesus says when Judas leaves: ‘Now has the Son of Man been glorified, and in Him God has been glorified... and God will glorify Him very soon.’ Here Jesus is referring to his approaching death on the cross. There on the cross we will see how deeply they love one another and us, as children of the heavenly Father. They glorify each other through acts of love for humanity in the most extreme ways. Jesus wants the disciples also to show the Father’s supernatural love towards one another, and to those who are open to believe in it and receive it.

People who say this is not an easy task, are quite right, because for human beings, by human efforts, it is impossible, but not for God (cf. Mt 19:26). But that means that we need to live in God and He in our hearts. To live in God we need to cloth ourselves with Christ not only superficially like merely going to Church, but also spiritually, in other words we need to learn to think and love in Jesus’ loving and merciful way, and from the heart (cf. Philipians 2:5-8).

In practice this means that we need to love those with a supernatural parental love who are entrusted to our spiritual care, such as our children, colleagues and even fellow parishioners, but without patronising each other. To show the heavenly Father’s love and not merely our limited natural love we need to die to ourselves. Dying to ourselves requires that we humble ourselves before the heavenly Father; we give up our own agendas and seek His agenda both with regards to our whole lives and also in daily life situations, because as Bishop Robert Barron, today’s well known Roman Catholic evangeliser says: ‘Your life is not about you’, but about Christ, and ultimately it is about the Father’s love and mercy, and we find our real self when we decrease (or humble ourselves) and He increases in us (cf. John 3:30) (we glorify Him).