

SICUT DILEXIT ME PATER ET EGO DILEXI VOS

A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter (B)

St Paul's Parish, Gävle, Sweden.

Texts: Acts 10: 25-26.34-35.44-48; Ps. 97: 1-4; 1 John 4: 7-10; John 15: 9-17.

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.” Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, these words which the Lord spoke to his disciples are the same words that he speaks to us as we listen. The words so speak for themselves that one could say that all we need do is read the text again more slowly. But the subject of love is one on which many people claim to be experts. And at this time and place where the claim to relativism appeals to some people, it is very important that we open our hearts to be taught by the One who is the Beloved of the Father.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you...Remain in my love.” Because many people claim to know what love is, there are many ways in which love is defined. But what we are talking about is the love of God. We all know that God is beyond the confines of time and space. For this reason, this attribute of God surpasses human knowledge. It defies definition. St John is right. He tells us plainly, “God is love”. Many different people use different thought patterns to try to describe what they understand by “love of God”. The most common is to use the Greek terms: *eros, philos and agape*, from which people usually prefer *agape* as meaning *unconditional love*. Among the Igbo people, love is called *Ihụnanya*, *literally meaning to see with the eyes and through the eyes*. But when we see someone, we do not see beyond what is physical. We do not know what is in the heart. But God knows every thing about everything about everyone. He sees everything in everyone. So the Igbo people add God to the word for love: *IhụnanyaChukwu – the love of God*. By this they mean that love is seeing someone as he really is and still holding that person dear, in spite of the person. We often say that the love of God for us is unconditional. We are right when we say that. But what does it mean? St John tells us: “This is the love I mean; not our love for God, but God’s love for us when he sent his Son to be a sacrifice that takes our sins away.”

It may still be difficult for us to grasp what the Apostle John is saying. But this example will help us. Think of a woman who is taking care of her baby. If someone should ask her, “Do you love your baby?” she would say, “What a foolish question? Of course I do.” If the other

should persist: "Why do you love her? What does she do for you?" The lady would likely tell the other, "That's really a very stupid question. My baby does not need to do anything to earn my love. She is my baby. Therefore, I love her." God loves us. It is not because we have earned it. It is not because we are worthy. It is not because of what we have done or failed to do. It is because we are children – his children. When we encounter suffering or disappointment in life, we are tempted to doubt the love of God for us. We behave like the Israelites of old. We say, "**The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.**" **But the Lord who is love asks us, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you"** (Is. 49: 14-15).

We may be doubting the love of God in our lives because of our individual personal history – because of the failure of our parents or teachers or others who failed to give us good example. We often associate wealth with the blessing of God and suffering with punishment. But God is just. And we know that the wealthiest are not the most righteous. We have examples of very good and hardworking people who are not very wealthy. We see very holy men and women who suffer deprivation and even misfortune.

We all agree that God the Father loves God the Son before time began. But speaking as true man among men, the Lord Jesus tells us, "**As the Father has loved me so I have loved you.**" If we examine the life of Jesus of Nazareth we understand what we are saying. Did Jesus as man really have it easy all the time? He performed many miracles. But how many of these were for his own benefit as a man? A quick look at some events of his life which we reflect on when we pray the Rosary will help. He was born – not in a palace – "**there was no room in the inn**" – he was born in a manger in a cold winter night. He was not protected by Herod. No. Instead, he was hated. St Joseph and his Blessed Mother had to take him to Egypt as a refugee for safety. It was a dangerous journey. He had to live there as long as Herod was alive. Back to Nazareth, we are not told that the family lived in a mansion. They likely lived in a small house, the type Joseph could afford. For Joseph was only a carpenter. When he began his ministry, he was not often applauded. Often he was challenged. He was popular among his disciples but hated by the religious authorities. We remember the event of Gethsemane and the agony of the Cross. It is difficult for us to see the love of the Father for Jesus while he suffered and died. But as soon as we realize that the Jesus who suffered and died is the same Lord who rose triumphant from the dead, our minds go beyond the events

of this world to something greater – to a life that is without end. Our suffering – no matter how great - is temporal. The love of God is timeless. It is beyond our comprehension. It defies human definition because it is eternal. God’s love for us in this world is not always milk and honey – just like his love for his Son who for our sake became the Son of man. But it is not limited to this world. It is without end. It is an everlasting love.

“This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you.” Because the Lord Jesus loves the Father, he demonstrated for us what this means. He left us an enduring example. By that example he teaches us that love for the Father is unconditional. It means total obedience to his will: he was obedient unto death - death on the Cross (Cf. Phil 2:8). By one and the same sacrificial death he demonstrated his love for the Father and his love for us. He died in time so that we might live in eternity. He died for us, the guilty – he washed away our sins with his blood – to make us righteous. And by this act he reconciled us with God who is love and made us adopted sons and daughters and co-heirs with himself. We are now counted as heirs of the eternal life. This is a free gift, the fruit of the love of God. But God who loves us unconditionally, who loves us so much that he sent his only Son (Cf. John 3:16), expects us to show appreciation for his love. He wants us to imitate him – to give freely what we have received without charge. He wants us to love our fellow human beings and to accept their love. This command means that we love all people irrespective of their race or the colour of their skin. God’s love is universal. He loves everyone in every part of the world and he wants us to imitate him. St Peter did not know this until it was revealed to him. We hear him today as tells us, ***“The truth I have now come to realize is that God has no favourites, but that any body of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him”*** (Acts 10: 34-35). We try to love at times. But we grow cold when the people we love offend us, when they are unfaithful, when they betray us. But the command of the Lord is ***“Love one another as I have loved you.”*** We are unfaithful again and again. But he is always faithful. His love is unconditional. And by dying for us he placed our need above his. It is not just that he loved as he loved himself. In a human way of speaking, we can say that he loved “more” than he loved himself. He laid down his life for us. This is the greatest love. There is nothing greater.

To conclude, let us honestly think about the condition in which we live. Some of us are experiencing difficulties right now. But in all this, we should not be discouraged. The love of

God in Christ is our anchor in the midst of the storms of this life and nothing can separate us from that love. The Apostle Paul knew this and teaches us, ***“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword...No in all these we are more than conquerors through him who loved us”*** (Rom. 8: 35-37).

*“With an everlasting love you care for me, O Lord;
I will sing forever of your love.”*

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