

# **CARITAS EST MAIOR**

*A Homily for the Fourth Sunday of the Year (C)*

*St. Paul's Parish, Gävle, Sweden.*

*Texts: Jere. 1:4-5.17-19; Ps. 70; 1 Cor 12: 31-13:13; Luke 4:21-30*

***"Love is the greatest."*** Dear brothers and sisters, what I have just said is from the teaching of the Apostle Paul, which we have heard from the Second Reading of today. And I believe it is the summary and the heart of all his teachings. Last Sunday we listened carefully as we read his teaching on the various gifts of the Holy Spirit. We learnt that each of us has been blessed with valuable gifts and that each of us is called to use the gifts we have received to serve the Lord in his Church and in the world. Every gift is valuable. Every gift is necessary. The Holy Spirit cannot give us what we do not need, or what is not useful. But the Apostle teaches us that among these good and useful gifts, there is a hierarchy in their order of importance.

He encourages us to seek the gifts that are higher on the scale. Here are his own words: "Be ambitious for the higher gifts." Which ones are they? They are faith, hope and love. Whereas other important gifts are useful, they cease with time. They are given for a time and for a purpose. But these three are foundational. They are also the gifts that guarantee our salvation. And even among these foundational gifts, one is the most important of all: love. Much has been said about love as the greatest gift. Much can still be said about it because, as the Apostle says, it has no end.

The Apostle's teaching can be difficult for us, and even discourage us unless we understand what he really means. We are encouraged to have faith and to grow in faith. But the Apostle says, "If I have faith in all its fullness, to move mountains, but without love, then I am nothing at all." We are taught to share what we have with those who do not have. But the Apostle says, "If I give away all that I possess, piece by piece, and if I even let them take my body and burn it, but am without love, it will do me no good whatever." How then should we understand the teaching of the Apostle? The teaching of the Apostle agrees with the teaching of the Lord. The Lord always insists that we should use our gifts and practice our virtues for the right intentions and for the right goal. So, there is an important question we should ask

ourselves before we do something in the name of love: what is my honest intention and what is my true goal? So, if I plan to give my money or some other material possession to people in need but first want journalists to be present armed with video and photo cameras to record the event for publication, my intention is not likely to be pure love and my goal may be to buy popularity. Politicians, especially who are seeking public office, like to be called philanthropists. The more popular they are, the more votes they are likely to get during elections.

But here is what the Lord says,

***Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matt. 6:1-4).***

Love is selfless, it entails self-denial. In true love I place the need of the other above mine. The true lover imitates Christ. He or she knows that true love demands self-emptying, self-sacrifice for the good of the neighbour. And the intention is always devoid of self-gain. The goal is always the glory of God the Father. True love is outward-looking. The story of the Good Samaritan leads us to grasp all I have said. He interrupted his journey. He took care of a total stranger. He spent his money, unplanned for. He was even ready to pay more. He did all without attracting attention. And he asked for no reward (Cf. Luke 10: 33-35).

This is the meaning of the teaching of the Lord today. The people of Nazareth - the place where he grew up - knew him as the "son of Joseph." They did not believe in him as the Son of God who had the power to perform miracles. But other people knew him as the Son of God and asked to be healed of their infirmities. And their faith made them whole. The people of Nazareth expected Jesus to use his power, which they doubted he had, to work exclusively for them. But Jesus came for all God's people in every part of the world. His love for humanity is perfect love. It is the model of all love. He came down from heaven in humility. He served humanity selflessly, in perfect charity. This reached its zenith when in the silence of

the Garden of Gethsemane, he sweated blood and on the lonely Cross he bled to death.

When we reflect for example on the life of St. Damien of Molokai, who served the lepers abandoned on that island, we see that he lived in perfect love. He imitated Christ: he gave all. He asked for nothing in return. This is what we are called to do.

*Here's my prayer to you, Lord:  
Give me the gift of true love.  
Let it be my intention and my goal in everything I do.  
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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