

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year B
Lectio divina on Jn 15,9-17

Jesus continues his catechesis by developing the idea of abiding in him as the mode and means of life of the disciple. After the image of the vine and the branches (Jn 15,1-8) he now makes it clear that this 'abiding' is not a pious inactivity nor does it mean the abandonment of one's own initiative. Abiding in Christ demands the keeping of his commandments, and it calls for a love that is expressed in diligent obedience. It is the source of total joy. The commandments come from the love that God has for us. The concept of abiding in Christ refers to the mutual love that should exist between us and God. This love is imposed by the one who has taught us the meaning of love. It knows no limits. The disciple must be willing to give even his life for his friends. We obey, not as slaves, but as friends who are loved by the great Lover. There is no greater happiness. A Christian who does not feel loved will find it difficult to love or to be happy. We know that we are loved by God, not by praying to God, nor by desiring him, but by doing his will, loving our neighbour without limit in the whole of our lives.

At that time: Jesus said to his disciples, ⁹ "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. ¹² This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. ¹⁷ This I command you, to love one another."

Read: understand what the text is saying, focussing on how it says it.

In this parallel section, the evangelist explains theologically the symbol of the vine. Abiding in Christ (Jn 15,4) is now understood as abiding in his love, which has its origin in the Father's love (Jn 15,9-10). The fruitfulness of the disciple (Jn 15,16) is illustrated with the image of the vine and the branches (Jn 15,4-6). The importance of the discourse is referred to twice (Jn15, 7.16). The paragraph concludes with a double mention of the Father who loves (Jn 15,9) and of the Father who gives.

Love is the origin and principle of the Father-Son relationship (Jn 3,35; 5,20; 10,17). It is also the motive and the term of comparison of the relationship that should exist between Jesus and his disciples (Jn 15,9). The Father is the source of the love that Jesus has for his disciples, a love which is, in fact, a reflection and imitation of the love with which Jesus feels loved. The way to abide in that loving relationship that exists in God is by practical obedience (Jn 15,10), like that of the Son. What holds for Jesus (Jn 14,31) holds also for the Christian. Love and observance of the commandments are one and the same thing

(Jn 14,15.21.23). The parallel formulation reinforces the boldness of the affirmation. Doing Christ's will, made specific in his commandments, is to be seen as an act of love. Christ abides in his Father's love, because he keeps his commandments. This was the goal achieved by Christ and it is the objective to be reached by Christians. The Son's way of acting is the inspiration and the source of the activity of Christians. The joy felt by Jesus through his obedience and his being loved by the Father becomes the patrimony of Christians who obey (Jn 15, 11). Faced with the reality that Christ is about to leave them, the disciples know that they can retain their joy if they love one another. The obedience they owe to the Lord coincides with their love for one another (Jn 15, 12; 13,34). Until the Lord returns, they will find joy in their love for one another. Their love for one another is not optional – it is commanded by the Lord. And the measure of that love is not at their discretion. The disciples' love has Christ's love as its rule and limit. "To lay down one's life" is a reference to the voluntary death of Jesus (Jn 15, 15.24). This is what gives Christ's command its binding force and establishes its limits. Moreover, in the words of St Augustine, this love "is different from the love that people have for one another." The Christian is to love his brother for the whole of his life, and must even be prepared to lose his life rather than stop loving him (Jn 15, 12-13. 1; Cor 13,3; Rom 5,6-8). Obedience to the Father's will can lead even to giving one's life for one's friends. The joy that comes from obedience is never illusory, not even in the face of death.

The statement of Jesus "I have called you friends" is unique in the New Testament (Jn 15,14; 11,11) and it is not found in early Christian writings. This friendship does not depend so much on the obedience of the disciples as on the obedience of the Master (Jn 13, 1; 17,26). We should not forget that according to John's Gospel, Jesus has given his life for those he loves. The criterion of friendship is not how we feel with regard to one another but the laying down of one's life, after the example of Jesus. We remain in Jesus' friendship if we remain obedient disciples, and this means loving as he did, even to the point of laying down one's life for one's friends (cf. Jn 13,36-38; 21,15-19).

As intimate disciples of Jesus, they know their Master's plans (Jn 15, 15), The servant receives orders, the friend shares secrets and intimacy. The criterion that guarantees the new relationship between Jesus and his disciples is rooted in participation in his plans, in knowledge of his programme and in the secrets shared (cf. Jn 17, 26). It does not require equality of nature nor a prior choice on the part of the disciples. The initiative is not theirs. It is a mutual relationship but it is not based on equality. The disciples have been chosen and commissioned, sent out with a task, to bring lasting fruit to the world. They are to love one another and the Father will hear their requests (Jn 15, 16). And since they did not choose, but were chosen, since they are not servants but friends, since they know the Master's destiny, they can be ordered to love (Jn 15, 17). Being loved imposes the obligation to love. No one can be expected to love until he has first experienced love. For one who is loved, loving is not a task imposed but a necessity to be satisfied.

Meditate: apply what the text says to life

"This I command you, to love one another." Were it not for the fact that we have heard the commandment of fraternal love so often, we would find what Christ says in this gospel passage disconcerting, even intolerable. Is there anyone among us who thinks it is possible to love his

neighbour, who really believes that this demand is reasonable? It seems that gradually, as we go on in life, we form another idea, to save us from being constantly disappointed in this regard. It is not just that we do not expect to be loved by people we do not know, or that we take for granted the indifference of strangers. We do not even succeed in loving the people who love us, as they deserve to be loved, and as we have promised to love them. Neither do we feel loved by them as we might wish to be loved, and maybe even have asked to be loved. People in love promise and demand love that is faithful. If we find it so hard to love relatives, acquaintances and friends, how can Jesus expect us to love our neighbour, even the stranger?

We need to remember this: we should love one another because we have first been the object of love. *“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”* Before ever we go to look for the neighbour we are to love, Christ has come to look for us. He has drawn close to us, and has chosen us out of love. *“You did not choose me, but I chose you.”* Christ has come to meet us. He has chosen us as people he loves. In this way, he has made it possible for us to do his will. All we have to do is to abide in his love.

“Is it love that makes us observe the commandments,” St Augustine asks, “or is it the observance of the commandments that generates love?” And he answers, “Anyone who does not love has no motivation to observe the commandments. We observe his commandments in order that he may love us, because, if he does not love us, we are unable to obey his word.” We were not loved because we were good. We are loved in order that we may become good.

Here, without any doubt, lies the root of our inability to love. Because we do not realize that we are loved by God, we do not know how to love and we believe that loving others is impossible. In all sincerity, we do not believe it possible that God loves us. Would things not be different in our lives, we think, if we were really important to God, or if he loved us even a little? We have asked ourselves this question many times. It seems a normal doubt. But this is a wrong way of thinking about God. It comes from judging the love of God according to what we want of him, and what we think is good for us, and as a result we do not experience how much he loves us. Because we fail to understand or accept his way of loving, we deprive ourselves of the joy of feeling loved. And anyone who does not feel loved is incapable of loving.

The disciple of Jesus knows that he is loved and knows how to abide in Jesus’ love, letting himself be loved by his friend and master who has given his life for him. If we let his will become ours, and seek to do his will, we will not fail to do what he asks of us. We will not allow ourselves to be discouraged by the apparently impossible commandment to love one another. The world of today is so used to easy love without lasting obligation or responsibility, that it does not believe in love freely given. It is the task of the followers of Jesus to give the world the witness of Christian love, the kind of love that he has taught us. If we, who know that we are loved by Jesus even to the laying down of his life for us, do not give this testimony, then who will give it? Without doubt, our world, our families and our own hearts, are becoming more self-centred, more inhuman, more incapable of believing in love. It is because we, the disciples loved by Jesus, do not tell the world that God loves us and wants us to love one another. It is not a question of whether or not we succeed in loving one another. It is enough to know that Jesus loves us and wants us to love one another.

“You are my friends if you do what I command you.” The friendship of Jesus is won by obedience to his will, however utopian and impossible it may seem. Jesus finds his friends among those who obey him. Instead of complaining that he does not love us, we should examine ourselves on whether or not we obey him. Anyone who does not love God’s will

cannot dream of being loved by God. It does not make sense to think that God would be interested in someone who is not interested in God's will. A friend is one who does the will of his friend, and so can count on him and feel sure of his love. Anyone who obeys God will, need never doubt God's love. When we doubt the love God has for us, and it seems that every day and every situation afford new reasons to doubt God's love, we are in fact acknowledging our disobedience.

Experience teaches us that the unfaithful friend and the lover who does not remain faithful, are the ones most likely to doubt the fidelity of the one they love. The same thing happens in our relationship with God – our infidelity leads us to doubt God's fidelity towards us. Our inability to love our neighbour leaves us feeling unloved by God. Like an unfaithful friend, we justify our indifference towards God by accusing him of being unfaithful towards us. Why is it that the people who are most obedient to God, are the people who know best that they are his friends? Anyone who does God's will knows that he is loved by God. We all have a sure way to enable us to experience today the love God has for us: *"if you keep my commandments you will abide in my love."*

Doing his will is already a lot, but it is not enough to enable us to feel that we are loved by God. Jesus makes a distinction between servants and friends. Both do what is expected of them, both fulfil the master's commands, but only the friend knows the reasons. The intimate friend knows the master and not just his commands. It follows then that we may be more or less obedient without ever succeeding in feeling that we are his friends. The obedience that Jesus asks of his disciples is not blind obedience. It is very demanding but it is never servile. Jesus does not make slaves of his friends. His love is not given to those who live like slaves or servants, doing what they are told without knowing the reason why. Jesus does not want to be surrounded by people who obey him only because they are afraid to disobey. He is our best friend, not a master who will never be satisfied. He asks for our life and our obedience because he has given his life for us. He wants friends who will trust him and will dare to live with the freedom that comes from never doubting his friendship.

The fruit of that obedience is fraternal love and the fruit of fraternal love is unlimited trust in God who loves us. We do not know what we are missing if we waste our time in many occupations and preoccupations which are not in pursuit of God's will. Our plans do not last, and our prayers are not heard, because they are not in keeping with God's will. Have we the courage to live in God's love by loving the things that God loves? This will bring us a great happiness, for we can count on the love of God who never fails to love us. And it will bring happiness also to God when he sees that his love in us is stronger than hatred or indifference. We will be the friends of his Son and deserving of his love.