

Sunday 11A 2023 SFX

Today in the Gospel Jesus says to the newly chosen apostles: "Do not turn your steps to pagan territory, and do not enter any Samaritan town; go rather to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." Why not take the Gospel out to the whole world? Our Lord's first instructions are related to the people of Israel, but after the resurrection the apostles would be directed to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world.

A related question for us is this. Who for us should be the focus of our attention and love? Should a Christian love everybody equally? Or is it right that our first attention be to our nearest and dearest, family and friends. Should we have a circle of friends? Shouldn't we just love everybody?

Now there are many reasons to say that we should love everyone! Of course, we should. The parable of the Good Samaritan is about where we draw our boundaries. Who is my neighbour? It is not a question we should ask we cannot draw the line, and say there is someone we should love, and someone we shouldn't. We should love the whole world!

But as much as I would like to, I for one find it difficult to love the whole world, although it is sometimes easier to love the sweet, nice people who briefly cross our radar. It can sometimes hard to love those closest to us, when they are stubborn, difficult and demanding, whether work colleagues or even family at times. Our loved ones can hurt us easily and our relationships are not always filled with the love joy and peace that we hope. Sometimes people can secretly struggle at home and in the family.

St John Henry Newman raised the question of the circles of our love in one of his sermons. He said it might be supposed that "the Son of God Most High could not have loved one person more than another" ... yet we find our Lord did have friends and private affections, as much as any of us, and so Newman concluded that there was nothing contrary to the spirit of the Gospel, nor the fulness of Christian love to direct our affections in a special way to those that are dear to us. It is natural to have best friends.

Yes, we want to love the whole world, we want to embrace in love the stranger, the foreigner, the many beyond our own shores, neighbourhoods and family that are in need. This parish is generous in collecting and helping those in need when called upon to do so.

But the best preparation to love the whole world is to begin with those who are close to us, friends and family. We begin with the person in front of us. Love him or her. Love your friends, love your family, love your colleagues, love your fellow parishioners. That is the best preparation for loving the world at large.

So maybe today our Lord knew the limits of the Apostles love. The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon them, they were not yet empowered to love the whole world. We begin to love by loving those about us, we prepare to love the whole world by cultivating affections towards those around us. It is good to have friends, so many saints have taught us this.

Newman identifies that at the heart of friendship is **love for the other**, and that love is not an abstract feeling towards people but something that has to be put into practice.

'... love, besides, is a habit, and cannot be attained without actual practice ... We see then how absurd it is, when writers ... talk magnificently about loving the whole human race with a comprehensive affection ... Such vaunting professions, what do they come to? feelings and nothing more. ... This is not to love men, it is but to talk about love. – The real love of man must depend on practice, and therefore, must begin by exercising itself on our friends around us, otherwise it will have no existence.'

So what does this love look like put into practice? Newman's answer here is that the test of love is self- sacrifice.

'By trying to love our relations and friends, by submitting to their wishes, though contrary to our own, by bearing with their infirmities, by overcoming their occasional waywardness by kindness, by dwelling on their excellences, and trying to copy them, thus it is that we form in our hearts that root of charity, which, though small at first, may, like the mustard seed, at last even overshadow the earth.'

Love is a habit and we have to practice it. And back to the Gospel how was the faith spread in the early days of the Church? It was often by personal affections and friendships, winning one heart at a time. *Cor ad cor loquitur*, heart speaking to heart, one person at a time, through ripples of personal influence.

Newman when he became a Catholic became an Oratorian, rooted in a parish, because he said they minister to the local area and evangelise 'with a line not a **net**' – one at a time. He had a particular gift for friendship. [The then] Prince Charles praised his gift of friendship. "His capacity for personal warmth and generous friendship is shown in his correspondence. There exist over 30 collected volumes of his letters, many of which, tellingly, are not addressed to the fellow intellectuals and prominent leaders but to family, friends and parishioners who sought out his wisdom. "When Newman finally left the Church of England, his sermon of farewell to the Anglican church at Littlemore – which he had founded – left the congregation in tears. It was entitled *The Parting of Friends*.

Newman prayed before the Blessed Sacrament: "I ask not to see – I ask not to know – I ask simply to be used." Just as he prayed not to see the distant scene, but take the next step necessary. He began with those around him, given him by the Lord to love.

I know it is painful for some that members of their family have lapsed from the faith. But we continue to love and to pray, building our heaven in our families and amongst our friends, heart speaking to heart of what we hold dear and what we love of our faith so that they might find joy in what we have.