

2nd Sunday (A)

15th January 2023

‘Pope Benedict’s teaching, I: *Deus Caritas Est*’

Is 49: *not enough to be my servant — I shall make you the light of the nations*

Ps 39: *My God I delight in Your law in the depth of my heart!*

1Cor 1: *greetings to the Church of God in Corinth*

Jn 1:29–34: *the One who is going to baptize with the Holy Spirit*

With the peaceful death of Pope Emeritus Benedict on New Year’s Eve, I had the inspiration to take with me on retreat at New Year some of his Encyclical Letters — the most formal teaching mode of the Popes. Generally, his works are not overly long, to the point, intellectually precise, and quite brilliant. And having read them, I then had the idea of using these weeks between New Year and Lent — these few Sundays of Ordinary Time — to share something of them with you. They treat the most fundamental of all the ideas of Christianity: Faith, Hope, Love, Truth; then there are also his post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations, one on the Word of God, and one on the Holy Eucharist. Now, of course, one cannot get through all of this material in just a few weeks before Ash Wednesday, especially as we have the visit of Cardinal Vincent, our Archbishop, next weekend. But I feel that it would be beautiful to honour in some such way the recent death of a

Pope whose influence on the Church has been enormous, dating right back to his attendance at the Second Vatican Council as a young priest and theological advisor.

Pope Benedict began with “love”! How very wise and insightful to have begun with this universal theme, a principle of human life both inside and outside the Church and in every race and culture. His first Encyclical Letter, published only 8 months after becoming Pope, is entitled *Deus Caritas Est* (“God is Love”). Those 3 words from St John’s first letter, as Pope Benedict immediately says, “express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny ... a kind of summary of the Christian life, ‘We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us’.” (n. 1). It is typical of Pope Benedict that he gets to the “heart” of it, in both senses, to examine how “God is Love,” *Deus Caritas Est*.

He takes some time to look at the different ways in which we use the western word, “love,” which in Greek is spread across a variety of terms — *ερος, αγαπη, φιλια* —

noting that of these the most typical Scriptural word is *αγαπη*, that is, benevolent (sacrificial, selfless, self-giving) love. The other terms, *ερος* — which is erotic/romantic, or even “intoxicating” love — is entirely missing from the NT; and *φιλια*, the love of friendship, occasionally occurs in connection with the care of Jesus for His disciples. But *αγαπη* is the word for love that the NT comes back to again and again to describe the sort of love that comes from God, and which is used in that famous dictum of St John, “God is love.” Are they to be seen as opposed, though, *ερος* and *αγαπη* — “worldly love” and “love grounded in and shaped by faith”? Pope Benedict says not:

“[we ask] whether the message of love proclaimed by the Bible and the Church’s Tradition has some points of contact with the common human experience of love, or whether it is opposed to that experience ... Were this antithesis to be taken to extremes, the essence of Christianity would be detached from the vital relations fundamental to human existence, and would become a world apart, admirable perhaps, but decisively cut off from the complex fabric of human life. Yet *ερος*

and *αγαπη* ... can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized.” (n. 7)

In other words, there is no yawning gap between the experience of “being in love” and the Christian claim that “God is Love.” Pope Benedict is at pains to say there isn’t some disconnect between these two, or some unbridgeable chasm and we must choose to live on one side or the other. Not at all! *Ερος* humanly lived, has its defects, its shortcomings, and needs “renunciation, purification and healing” — it can easily be misused and is prone to sinful misapplication — but it is still a part of our God-given human nature and in that sense is good. The unity of love, the single reality, the connecting idea of all forms of love for us as human beings, even if we experience a tension in ourselves sometimes, comes from God.

In fact, Pope Benedict goes on to speak of our Judaeo-Christian experience of God — revealed to us in the history of the People of God (Tradition) and in Scripture — as showing that God’s love for us is both

Passion and Benevolence: His total loving is at one and the same time *eros* and *agape*. In Him, the two are perfectly harmonized — and this is why many images of the Almighty in His love for Israel, or for the Church, are in metaphors of betrothal, marriage, and erotic love. “God’s *eros* for man is also totally *agape*” as the Pope puts it;

“This is not only because it is bestowed in a completely gratuitous manner, without any previous merit, but also because it is love which forgives. ... God’s passionate love for His people — for humanity — is at the same time a forgiving love. ... So great is God’s love for man that by becoming man He follows him even into death, and so reconciles justice and love.” (n. 10)

Reflecting on what it means for God to be the source and origin of love — as well as of all being — then allows the believer to understand better what it means to be a human being, made in the image and likeness of God. No wonder love drives the actions of humanity, when God our Maker “is Love.” Pope Benedict, instead of launching in here with charity, our benevolent “love of neighbour,” speaks first of our *eros*, our passionate/romantic love, and shows

how through faith in God this is ‘tamed,’ properly directed, and reaches its highpoint in monogamous marriage:

“From the standpoint of creation, *eros* directs man towards marriage, to a bond which is unique and definitive; thus, and only thus, does it fulfil its deepest purpose. ... Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and His people, and *vice versa*. God’s way of loving becomes the measure of human love.” (n. 11)

In this regard, our *forthcoming series (starting Thurs)* on love, marriage, sexuality, chastity, gender is very pertinent, and very important: a crucial way of your living out the command to live your *eros* in a fully Christian way!

Jesus, as God made man, is obviously, in this picture, the perfection of love, expressing the Father’s love in an integral human way. The Pope speaks of Our Lord’s life, and especially of His Passion as “love in its most radical form.” Jesus’s parables are “no mere words: they constitute an explanation of His very being an activity. His death on the Cross is the culmination ... in which He gives Himself in order to raise man up and save him.” (n. 12)

The Pope then emphasizes that the Eucharist is an essential part of this picture of divine love in Jesus. His total self-offering is made enduring, available to us throughout history, in the Mass. No wonder an ancient term for the Eucharist is in fact the *αγαπη*: to celebrate the Mass together is to share in a previously inconceivable union with the love of God. And this community aspect of celebrating the Mass means that I cannot have this love of God “just for myself; I can belong to Him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, His own. Communion draws me out of myself, towards Him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians. We become ‘one body,’ completely joined in a single existence. Love of God and love of neighbour are now truly united.” (n. 14)

Our “love of neighbour” is another crucial dimension of the Pope’s Christian consideration of love. He reminds us of that teaching of St John that “ ‘if anyone says ‘I love God’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot

love God whom he has not seen.’ ... love of neighbour is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and that closing our eyes to our neighbour blinds us to God.” (n. 16) The Pope teaches us that there is no way that our love for God can be merely formal or ritualistic, i.e. a devout duty but actually to all intents and purposes ‘loveless’ in respect of our neighbour. Let me end this (cursory) examination of a vast topic with some final words from the great teacher:

“Only my readiness to encounter my neighbour and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbour can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much He loves me. The saints — consider the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta — constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbour from their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord, and conversely this encounter acquired its realism and depth in their service to others. Love of God and love of neighbour are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment. But both live from the love of God who has loved us first. ... Love is ‘divine’ because it comes from God, and unites us to God.” (n. 18)