

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Jan 7th 2014

“. . . for God is love.”

Every time I read this passage – and others like it – I have to keep reminding myself that the word we have translated “love” doesn’t exactly mean affection or liking, at least in the ordinary sense in which we use those terms. It is better translated as “self-giving”. “For God is self-giving” is how verse 8 should perhaps read. More than affection, self-giving means caring deeply about someone. How deeply? Enough, in this case, for God to send God’s Son “into the world so we may have life . . .” Jesus came bringing – and giving – not just any life, but amazingly, God’s life – the ultimate in self-giving. And not just God’s life in the person, Jesus, but God’s life as a gift to human beings, a gift by which we can live.

For many of us it is too much to believe. We can accept that we’re supposed to be holy. But to live with God’s own holiness. Too much!

Adam and Eve, in the creation story, aspired to immortality. That’s what being “like Gods” meant (as the snake told Eve would happen if she ate). Their reaching for what was God’s alone to give is what constitutes the fall. Eternal life is gift – pure gift – gift we are invited to accept, but cannot snatch (Phil 2:6), just as we are invited to the royal banquet (Luke 14:15–24) – an invitation we can accept or reject but cannot demand.

That self-giving of God underlies everything else in the Bible and in Christianity. The late Andrew Greeley, in his book *The Sinai Myth*, stressed, for example, that the Ten Commandments were not rules by which the Hebrews would earn God’s favor, but instead were a description of how a people sharing God’s life would appropriately behave. After all, if you’re sharing God’s life you can’t go around lying, cheating, stealing, coveting, and so forth. But the rules don’t come first. It’s God’s self-giving that comes first.

It’s sobering to reflect that the exalted, inspiring rhetoric of this first letter of John was composed in a situation of dissension and conflict. The Johannine community had splintered into factions fighting one another. The author stresses what ought to have been obvious (to us as much as to them). Dissension is not of God. Do we encounter similar divisions today? Are we paying attention? This is not to suggest that differences are unimportant or that all views are equally valid. But it is to stress that what is primary is God’s self-giving love and the life of God that Christ has given us. Once we lose sight of that, then splintering and factions take over.

The author of 1 John, in a few verses preceding today's reading, stresses that we are to manifest that love – that self-giving – not “in word or speech but in deed and in truth”. (1 Jn 3:18). We're past Christmas and into “Ordinary” time. Deed and truth should be the “ordinary” feature of our “ordinary” lives.

Robert P. Heaney