

**"Ancient Fears Versus Genuine Love"
A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (A)**

'Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good . . .' Romans 12:9

I have only a poetic grasp of most of this. I'm not a psychologist; I'm not a trained clinician. I have no education or experience in studying the development of the human mind, the human psyche.

What I do know (or think I know) is based more on observation than study; more from having lived close to (what is it?) seven decades. And in that time, and from what I know of myself, I've come to see that the pattern of a righteous life which St. Paul famously describes in his letter to the Romans today is, for most of humanity most of the time, an all but intolerable challenge. It is, at best, a steep, uphill climb.

Take a moment and let his words truly sink in. . . . 'Rejoice in hope,' he says, 'be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.'

Oh, but it gets better and harder ever more difficult! 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.'

Need I go on? Clearly, these are exalted and exalting thoughts noble thoughts, as Paul himself would call them. And I'm certain that deep down, in the secret, honest, self-aware recesses of each of us, this is how we want to live. Unless we are so far gone in hatred or hurt or bitterness, so untouched by any emotion resembling pity or understanding, we know this is how people should live. This is what the human race should look like.

We know this is true; but knowing it doesn't make it any easier, does it? We may believe it, but we seldom actually feel it. It hasn't really sunk in. And besides, our knowledge of these things of compassion and humility, of self-giving love is such a new development anyway, such a new need, that it's hardly had time to take root in us as a species, let alone grow to full maturity. It's the new kid on the evolutionary block!

I realize the poet is on pretty shaky scientific ground here! Let's just say I sense that the stronger, more durable, more potent human impulse is a much older one than that state of nobility which Paul extols. In fact, we all know it is a very ancient and primal one. It is the impulse for fundamental survival, the tooth-and-claw fight over resources and territory. It is the reptilian-brained fear that someone else someone less deserving will get to the hunting grounds or the watering hole or the bottom land before we do.

Added to this is the fear of danger, real or imagined (it doesn't really matter) and the consequent fear of those who we think pose an existential threat to our safety and well-being. And if those others look or speak or believe differently than we do, then that fear is only magnified, enlarged out of any reasonable sense of proportion. Indeed, fear of this kind so deep, so ancient, so dependable can and does dwell in a realm beyond reason itself.

Well, by now you probably know where I'm going with this and why. It's just that, in this season of decision (as I'm calling it), we are hearing again, sadly but consistently, the voices that would call us back to these primal fears, and to that tooth-and-claw existence that we should have left behind eons ago, but that still has the power to persuade us, to charm us, to enrage us, and so still to divide us as citizens and as children of God.

More than that, such unreasoning fear makes it hard to distinguish between the ferment taking place around us and the root cause of this tumult. Fear conflates the violence and lawlessness of a minority with the centuries-old struggle by countless others for basic justice and simple dignity. Fear might clear the streets of all wrongdoing; but it still will leave unanswered and unresolved all the wrongs which people have suffered, all the sorrows our country has endured. The protests might disappear; but the problem will live on.

Although Paul was unacquainted with our own political culture (and blessedly so?) he nonetheless was keenly aware of the weaknesses in human nature. That he goes to such rhetorical lengths to remind his Roman church of what the beloved community should look and act like only means that that church was failing to live out those ideals; that it was listening, too ardently, to those same dark, primal voices that fill the air around us today.

'Do not be overcome by evil,' Paul says at last, 'but overcome evil with good.' This doesn't mean that we condone or belittle or ignore any act of violence or destruction; rather, it means we resist it by raising up something higher and stronger and truer in its place. It means that we hear (finally and fully) the cries of the oppressed and brutalized, the gunned down and the tortured; that we recognize the violence of bigotry and systems of hate; that we feel the tears and eloquence of an anguished mother and of a jobless father and of a grieving family as though they were our own.

It means we 'rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.' It means that we 'outdo one another in showing honor'; it means that we are 'ardent in spirit,' that we 'serve the Lord.'

I don't know what else to say; and I'm sure I've said too much. Take what you like from it, what you think you can use. If you feel so called, try to let your neighbors and friends, the people you meet and converse with over these next few months, at least come to appreciate what St. Paul is saying to us, which is the same thing God in Christ is expecting of us. Live out that teaching before the world as best you can. 'Hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good.' And then, as you feel further called, vote in the light of that truth. Amen.

Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +