

Homilies for February

Author(s): Eamonn Conway

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# Homilies for February

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Eamonn Conway

**Fifth Sunday of the Year**

*February 4*

Is. 58:7-10. Ps. 111. 1 Cor. 2:1-5. Mt. 5:13-16.

From the accents, I'd say that some came from as far away as Tyre and Sidon: among them were redundant fishermen, greedy tax collectors, lonely lepers, impetuous zealots. There was an old woman there – she must have been bent double for years. Some were young women, no longer content to busy themselves with domestic affairs. Also that harlot from Magdala. And I think I even spotted two Pharisees.

We came because he was not just another scribe with a 'should-be sermon', though we were a little wary of him. Sometimes he put his listeners very much on edge. This time there were tears in his eyes: I think he pitied us.

Then he spoke. He said, 'you *are* the light of the world . . . you *are* the salt of the earth . . .'. And suddenly we saw ourselves as God sees us: not as others see us, nor even as we usually see ourselves. As his words sank in, we became aware of our dignity and self-respect. And we praised our Father in heaven.

His disciples invited us to share our bread and fish with each other, and sure what else could we do? As we strangers ate together, words from Isaiah came to me: share your bread with the hungry, shelter the homeless poor, clothe the naked, do not turn from your own kin, then will your light shine like the dawn. And I was disturbed, for I realized: now we were all kin.

It may or may not have been like that. Beyond doubt however, is love's power to transform. If we really believed in God's love for us, and if we could see ourselves even for a moment as he sees us, as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, then we would be different people. God's acceptance brings self-acceptance and acceptance of others . . . the man who is truly there has come of his own self and must shed the guise of all he knew before (John of the Cross).

We could say a prayer for the grains of salt scattered elsewhere

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Eamonn Conway is a priest of the archdiocese of Tuam. At present pursuing doctoral studies at the University of Tübingen, West Germany.

this morning. A couple of thousand years ago curiosity, if not frustration, might have led them to a hillside in Galilee where, in the presence of the light that enlightens all men and women (John 1:8), they would have experienced a Father's love and praised him for his goodness.

Those of us who still gather to give praise to God might remember that . . . the true lights . . . those who are most important for the eternal salvation of mankind as well as individuals, are those who possess and radiate most faith, hope and love, most humility and unselfishness, most fortitude in carrying the cross, most happiness and most confidence (Karl Rahner). Now who might they be?

### Sixth Sunday of the Year

February 11

Sir. 15:16-21. Ps. 118. Cor. 2:6-10. Mt. 5:17-37.

We often forget that the 'Good News' is not only good, but also radically new. This would not have had to be pointed out to Jesus' listeners, for he was tinkering with the central tenets of their faith (the Decalogue), and he claimed no authority other than his own: . . . 'But I say to you'. The result was that people were shocked, insulted, disturbed, delighted or liberated by what Jesus said.

Jesus invited his disciples to relate to God and to each other in a new way. He wished them to have a fresh outlook and a different set of values. They were to live as if in a foreign country with different customs, a different way of life, and under a new regime. Jesus invited them to live under the reign of God.

Under God's reign, people are to be more just, 'for I tell you, if your *dikaosune* is not far greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the reign of heaven'. But it is not simply to be more of the same *kind* of justice: Jesus does not ask his disciples to become better Pharisees! It is to be a new kind of justice because it is to have a new source: love. This love is present in Jesus and made possible by him alone. Stories of the other cheek and the second mile narrate how love and justice are to be realised in people's lives. From now on each one is not only to receive a fair share, but more than it. With justice rooted in love, it is more important to behave morally than merely according to the law. Honesty, generosity and sincerity must be added to the Law if it is to be complete i.e. if it is to achieve its purpose, namely the right-ordering of our relationships with God and each other. Jesus makes it quite clear that he is not short-selling salvation.

Perhaps sometimes we do. One of the main accusations hurled at regular Church-goers is that they are hypocritical, that what they participate in on Sunday has little influence on the rest of the week. The most disturbing thing is that sometimes this accusation is made by people who are as honest, just and sincere as we think we are.

Justice was a priority for Jesus Christ and it should be a priority for his disciple too: a justice which extends, as Albert Nolan puts it, not only to the bedroom but to the boardroom as well. Are we ever *really* tempted to leave our gift at the altar and go to be reconciled? At Mass it is so easy to give one another the sign of peace. It shouldn't be.

The Good News is both good and new. To hear it and accept it is to live as if in a different country. For the Good News is wisdom never known before and beyond our greatest imagining (1 Cor. 2:6). We cannot limit its impact. The words of Jesus are like ambassadors to the lands of our deepest selves. His words invite us to change. But we can only change if we wish to, for in every change there is a little dying and a little giving of birth (Sir. 15:17). The Good News is an invitation, not an imposition. In Jesus we discover the freedom and the strength to accept.

### Seventh Sunday of the Year

February 18

(Lev. 19:1-2, 17-18. Ps. 102. 1 Cor. 3:16-23. Mt. 5:38-48.)

Jesus did not want his disciples to be blind and toothless people. He wanted them to be perfect and complete, fully human, lacking nothing. This is made possible by the *kerygma*: the realization that they are loved by God. But Jesus does not only tell them they are loved: in him the word is also an event. In Jesus the disciples experience God's love and acceptance.

Aware of their Father's love for them, the *didache* – the love commandment – makes complete sense to the disciples. In the last two Antitheses in Matthew's gospel, the *didache* reaches its climax. The disciples are told that they will be distinct from others in that their love is to be for all – even for those who hate him.

To be perfect/complete (*teleios*), the young disciple is asked to shed his possessions (Matt. 19:21). To be perfect, disciples must also shed hatred. Their love for each other is to mirror God's love for them. God's love is limitless: so should theirs. God forgives, always: so should they. God loves their weaknesses as well as their strengths: they should accept the weaknesses in themselves and in others. For the disciple there are no borders, no neat distinctions between neighbour and enemy, no 'ifs', 'no buts'.

The Law was full of distinctions: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stroke for stroke, broken limb for broken limb (Ex. 21:24, Lev. 24:19). The *jus talionis* (which can be traced back to 1750 B.C.) may sound brutal to us, yet it was meant to be a means of measuring justice rather than of securing revenge. And is it not the basic philosophy still underlying our system of justice?

It is unchristian. Jesus' disciples are to love those who persecute

them and offer the wicked no resistance. They are to be vulnerable, i.e. they are to allow themselves to be wounded, for if one cannot be hurt, then one cannot love either. What is more, they are to pray for those who persecute them, realizing that wicked people are also God's creatures, loved by him and badly in need of his love. Jesus provides no new casuistry to replace the *jus talionis*: in Christian love there is to be no cutting-off point.

It is easy to talk, yet many know love's painful price: parents neglected in homes for the aged, children abandoned before or after birth, husbands or wives whose love has somehow gone wrong, celibates tired of loving, and those who have experienced such hatred and violence that their lives are now robbed of any meaning. How can those who have never been loved risk loving? How love, and hence their pain, has not been wasted?

The *didache* would be an impossible demand, and even a foolish one, were it not for the fact that in Jesus we experience even more than our Father's love for us. We also encounter one human being who loves. Jesus does not allow those who hate him to dictate the extent of his love. He offers his persecutors no resistance; rather, he prays for them (Lk. 23:34). He accepts them and forgives them. He sheds his blood for them and for all.

He invites us to do no more and no less, in his memory.

### **Eighth Sunday of the Year**

*February 25*

Is. 49:14-15. Ps. 61. 1 Cor. 4:1-5. Mk. 6:24-34.

We all want to have more. One way of having more is to desire less. Yet we seek security in possessions – all of us. But despite our money and all it can buy, despite our education and knowledge, we still experience something as lacking. There is always an abyss between what I have and what I want, between who I am and who I would like to be. There are times when I am happy, but something always comes along to dissolve my joy.

At times we realize just how disposable our world is. Recently I visited a family who lack nothing in the sense of possessions. Their mother is now terminally ill, and sadly, for the first time they recognize their poverty. Plastic paradises are so carefully constructed and so easily lost.

Jesus wants his disciples to possess genuine happiness and joy which will mark them out as his disciples. Therefore he makes them a promise: all things will be given them (Matt. 6:33). All they have to do is set their hearts on the reign of God and his justice (*dikaiosune*). This is the key point and it is interesting that here once again justice is mentioned, as in Matt. 3:15, 5:20 and 6:1.

Setting one's heart on the reign of God and his justice is to have faith. Faith in God distinguishes the disciple. The disciple believes

that God who has created us will not abandon us. How could he – for he is like a father and a mother to us (Matt. 6:26, 33, Is. 49:15). Could a mother forget her baby?

If faith distinguishes the disciple, then possessiveness characterizes those who lack faith (Matt. 6:32). Lacking faith, I seek to satisfy my need for security elsewhere. Besides in material things, I might seek security in knowledge, esteem, power or in people. Sometimes what I think is my love for someone else is really a sophisticated form of possessiveness.

If I am possessive, then not only is it more difficult for me to be loving, generous and just: I become anxious and worried, for something is always lacking, or I am afraid that I will lose what I have. Worry and anxiety are the companions of possessiveness. What is worse, they are but subtle forms of self-worship, and self-worship is worship of a fragile god. For by being anxious and by worrying, I am trying to be God. I am insisting that my destiny depends upon myself alone. I am refusing to abandon myself into God's hands, to trust in him. I am disputing God's ability to care for me; I am denying God's love for me. I am doubting God's word, and that is to deny the incarnation.

Therefore those who are possessive do not know Jesus. They do not recognize him for who he is and what he signifies. They have no faith or poor faith, for faith is, *in nuce*, surrender and abandonment. Their possessiveness prevents them from experiencing God's love which would put an end to their anxiety and worry. This is why Jesus speaks so vehemently: it is impossible to be the servant both of God and of money. You cannot be the slave of two masters.

But those who know Jesus will not want to serve any other. For in knowing Jesus, they will experience a Father's love. They will delight in the surrender and abandonment which characterized Jesus' relationship with his Father and see his confidence in God as normative for themselves. They will allow themselves to be embraced by the Father as Jesus was. And the Father's love will be more than enough.

**That alabaster jar.** Holiness, if it is holiness, is always new. There is a new holiness to our time because there are new situations, new realities, new relationships. Holiness is always new as it is always ancient. Holiness is a transcendence, a call to extravagance, and perhaps even a call to what the world would call wastefulness, that alabaster jar. For whom will you pour out your alabaster jar? Upon whom will you waste your love? For whom will you waste your life – as he wasted his life, his love, for us?

—EDWARD FARRELL, *Free To Be Nothing* (Dublin, Dominican Publications) p. 118.