

Reflecting
on the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time



Archdiocese of
Liverpool

Prepare to be attentive to *The God Who Speaks in this story.*



- Light a candle or tea light if possible.
- Perhaps place a flower from the garden or a plant next to the light.

Let us begin our time of prayer for the Twenty Third Sunday in Ordinary Time:

Breathe deeply and allow yourself to become still.

Let the music help you to relax. Ask for God's grace and light to fill your heart and your mind as you open to the Word.

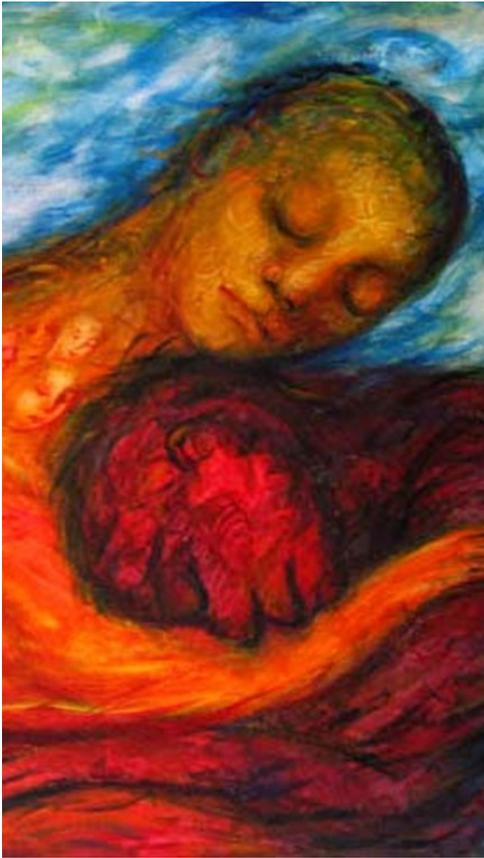


This is my command to you: love one another.
Just as I, the Lord, love you.
Love one another.
Amen, so shall it be.



Spend some time just looking at the three images.

- Where is your eye drawn to?
- What feelings are you experiencing?
- What are you noticing?



Pray the Responsorial Psalm for today.



O that today you would listen to his voice! 'Harden not your hearts.'

Come, ring out our joy to the Lord;
hail the rock who saves us.
Let us come before him, giving thanks,
with songs let us hail the Lord.

O that today you would listen to his voice! 'Harden not your hearts.'

Come in; let us bow and bend low;
let us kneel before the God who made us:
for he is our God and we
the people who belong to his pasture,
the flock that is led by his hand.

O that today you would listen to his voice! 'Harden not your hearts.'

O that today you would listen to his voice!
'Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as on that day at Massah in the desert
when your fathers put me to the test;
when they tried me, though they saw my work.'

O that today you would listen to his voice! 'Harden not your hearts.'

Now, either read slowly to yourself this story from the Gospel according to Matthew or better still, read it aloud, again slowly.

From the Gospel according to Matthew 18:15-20



Jesus said 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

The Gospel of the Lord.

Spend a few moments allowing some aspect of the Gospel – a word/phrase or image – to touch you more deeply and read this part a second time, aloud if possible.

The reflection on the Gospel is provided by Fr Chris Thomas, Director of the Irenaeus Project.



Some years ago I met a man called Tony who was a recovering alcoholic. He shared with me his story of brokenness and mess. He had begun drinking at the age of nine to hide the pain of an abusive uncle whom he hated with a passion. He was too ashamed to tell

any adult what was happening to him. Drink seemed to be the only way of obliterating the hurt and pain. He was expelled from school and taken into care where he was educated in a special unit. He joined the army and was thrown out because of continual drunken behaviour.

Drink led to drugs and into the spiral of taking and selling to finance the habit. Tony had several spells in prison and while in his last incarceration, some twenty years earlier, he had met Jim who was a Methodist lay preacher. Jim worked in the prison as a visitor and this wonderful man coaxed Tony into a place of deep awareness of the love and forgiveness of God.

Tony told me that it was hard for him to face the reality of what he'd done, and he often ran away inside himself and began to blame others, but Jim was always there to remind him of the truth of his actions. When I met Tony, he was a man full of joy, aware that his past was behind him and forever grateful to God for having found him and revealed the truth of forgiveness.

I doubt that Jim found it easy to face Tony with the things that he'd done wrong but in order to experience the forgiveness of God we have to go there.

That's not because God doesn't forgive us if we don't, but because, unless we face things and let go of them then the anger and bitterness that we often have within blocks us from knowing that loving forgiveness is being poured out.

I think the invitation of the Gospel today is that we are to be like Jim, the prison visitor, and encourage others to go on that journey of facing and letting go in order to find life, and of course we can only help others on that journey when we're on it ourselves.

The Gospel gives us a particular format to follow but that was for a specific time and place. Behind the words lie the truth that we are to help others in facing the issues that they have to deal with and not flinch from the difficult places that we might have to go. I think the truth is that very few of us like to name the uncomfortable issues or to be unpopular because of naming difficult things. It's not an easy road to travel. To engage in the work of reconciliation is never easy. To be a healer and reconciler is never easy but it's at the heart of our ministry as followers of Jesus.

Henri Nouwen, the great spirituality author, says that compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain. That can never mean barging in with easy answers and quick solutions. It does mean learning to be present and that is the hardest thing to do in the midst of pain because we want the quick fix. We want it to go away. We do not want to feel our own vulnerability even though that is precisely what is needed because that is what Jesus did.

Following Jesus was never about escaping from the world but about being transformed so as to live in the world in a radically different way. Our ministry to the world is about learning to be like Jesus who healed and reconciled by being present and helping people acknowledge the truth through love and compassion.

The Good News comes right at the end of the Gospel when Matthew has Jesus say, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' When we set out on the journey to follow Jesus, he is with us every step of the way and when we commit our lives to following him, he will give us the strength and the words we need to help others on their journey. There is no need to be afraid because he is with us.

We have power to be healers and reconcilers in the world because we no longer need our lack of forgiveness and bitterness to hold on to. The power of Agape love flows through us. We have power to bring sight to the blind as we share the truth of the love of God with the world.

We have the power to raise the dead as we fill people with hope and life by simply loving them. We have power to heal the sick, set the down-trodden free. That is such good news for a world in which there are many dead people walking around, huge numbers of sick and blind and down-trodden. Let us pray for courage to be free ourselves and help others be the same.

Take a few moments to receive and reflect on this poem by Joy Harjo, US Poet Laureate. She was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and is a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation.



When we made it back home
Back over those curved roads
That wind through the city of peace
We stopped at the doorway of dusk
As it opened to our homelands.
We gave thanks for the story
For all parts of the story
Because it was by the light of those challenges
We knew
ourselves—

We asked for forgiveness.
We laid down our burdens next to each other.

As a result of your reflection, offer some prayers of intercession for the people and situations in our world today that seem to you to be most in need.

Let's begin with the prayer Archbishop Malcolm has asked us to pray at this time and then you may like to include one or more of prayers that follow and/or add your own:



God Our Father,
each person is precious to You.
You are the Giver of life.
Have mercy on us and protect us at this time,
as the coronavirus threatens health and life.
You are an ever-present Helper in time of trouble.
Watch over those who are suffering,
give strength to those who are aiding the sick
and give courage to all in this time of anxiety.
We ask this of you in the name of your Son.
Jesus Christ.
Amen.

We pray for Pope Francis who constantly urges people to seek peace and reconciliation even in the most difficult circumstances.

We pray for all who work for peace and justice in the war-torn parts of our world.

We pray for our health workers and carers ... may their daily acts of healing and caring be valued and appreciated by us all.

We pray for teachers as they return to their classrooms with all the new restrictions impacting on the learning environment ... may they be safe and protected from the virus with which we are all learning to live.

We pray for those who have died and those close to death ... may they know the peace of God's presence.

We pray now in the words Jesus gave us:

Our Father,
who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

To end your time of reflection, listen to *Grant Me The Grace*.



Help me forgive those who slander my name
(*Love one another as I have loved you*)
Those who trample the lowly, the poor and the lame
(*Love one another as I have loved you*)

*For as God forgives, so must we forgive and see Christ in every face
Turn away from hate, offer warm embrace - Lord, I ask of you, grant me the grace.*

Let me give warmth to those out in the cold
(*Love one another as I have loved you*)
Those who act without feeling, with hearts filled with stone
(*Love one another as I have loved you*)

*For as God forgives, so must we forgive and see Christ in every face
Turn away from sin, let your Spirit in - Lord, I ask of you, grant me the grace.*

Grant me the strength to make peace and do right
(*Love one another as I have loved you*)
To reach out and be unto others as Christ
(*Love one another as I have loved you*)

*For as God forgives, so must we forgive and see Christ in every face,
Draw me close to you with a love renewed - Lord, I ask of you, grant me the grace.*

Acknowledgements

Cover image: detail of stained glass from Peninsula Bible Church, Cupertino.

Images on page 3: *Forgiveness* (artist unknown); *Two or Three are Gathered in my Name*, James Tissot (1836–1902), Wikimedia Commons; members of a white community kneel down before members of a black community asking for forgiveness after years of racism. From a video shared by chrisgperry on Instagram.

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Poem by Joy Harjo: *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2015.

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