

SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF THE COMPASSIONATE, SACRED HEART OF JESUS



How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
my soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
for the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love with a passion put to use
in my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
with my lost saints, I love thee with the breath,
smiles, tears, of all my life! and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

INTRODUCTION

So wrote the 19th c. English poetess Elizabeth Barrett Browning in one of her greatest Sonnets (43). Of all human emotions and all human needs, love, along with food, is the one that sustains life. If a baby is not held, lovingly, it will slowly die. If we are not loved, we are diminished. All you need is love.

Maybe that's why we are so attracted by that great symbol of love – the heart. Recently the sign of the 'hand heart'



has come to symbolise our common humanity as we affirm that love is greater than hate. The heart is the symbol all can relate to.

THE SACRED HEART AND ANGLICAN DEVOTION

The Church has long known the importance of this image and the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, whose Feasts the Church, though not the Church of England, celebrated (*on Friday*) and (*yesterday*). They have been the object of inspiration and devotion for centuries – even *if* most Anglicans don't realise this.

Yet the Heart of Jesus *has* been part of English devotion for hundreds of years.

In the early 11th century S. Aelred of Rievaulx, the great English Cistercian, wrote extensively about '*Spiritual Friendship*' and maintained that the highest kind of friendship, that friendship which God invites us into, is a selfless communion of hearts (1.45).

Shortly afterwards Francis of Assisi, whose spirituality has been the inspiration for so many Anglicans, wrote a powerful prayer asking that our hearts might be immersed in God:

*May the power of your love, Lord Christ,
fiery and sweet as honey, so absorb our hearts
as to withdraw them from all that is under heaven.
Grant that we may be ready to die for love of your love,
as you died for love of our love.*

Later on, in the 14th century, the anchoress Julian of Norwich wrote in her book, 'Revelations of Divine Love', of the way Jesus showed, through his pierced side: '*a fair, delectable place, and large enough for all mankind that shall be saved to rest in peace and in love.*' (Rev. 10)

And that is what makes this Feast of the Sacred Heart so important and why it such a pity that our Church sees fit not to celebrate it. Because it concerns the way in which the heart of *each* of us needs to be re-made, re-shaped and re-focussed into the Heart of God. That is where we are called to live out of – God's compassionate, loving heart.

THE STORY OF THE SACRED HEART

Devotion to the Sacred Heart began to flourish far more widely when, on the Feast of S. John the Beloved Disciple in 1673, a young French sister of the Visitation Order, Margaret Mary Alacoque, received the first of a number of revelations concerning Christ's love. In a vision she was invited to rest her head on the Heart of Jesus and, in so doing, began that devotion which was to sweep the world, a devotion to which this month of June is dedicated.

Yet for many Anglicans all this talk about Sacred Hearts and the art often associated with it seems very flamboyant. Distasteful, even. We don't do emotion. And that was a particular problem in 18th century England. For some began to realise that in ignoring emotion Christianity was suffering.

Then along came John Wesley.

It was as a consequence of his heart being "deeply warmed" that the Evangelical Revival could be said to have blossomed. That 'warming' occurred when he heard a description, by Luther, of the change God works in the heart through faith in Christ. And there's evidence that Wesley was drawn to devotion to the Heart of Jesus, not least because he arranged for the re-printing of a book about the Sacred Heart by the 17th cent. Puritan, Thomas Goodwin. Christianity, to Wesley, concerned: "*the loving God with all our heart, and our neighbours as ourselves, and in that love abstaining from all evil, and doing all possible good to all men.*"

There's a truth here, of course, upon which each of us always need to reflect, the truth of God's love for us, especially in our brokenness:

*Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation;
enter every trembling heart.*

LATER DEVELOPMENTS

It was a truth that inspired the early Franciscans in the Church of England to dedicate the first community of men to the Sacred Heart. Except they chose not to use what might have appeared as 'Roman Catholic' so they called their fledgling Order the *Society of the 'Divine Compassion'*, a dedication that has inspired others.

FR. ARTHUR SHEARLY CRIPPS

One of them was Fr. Arthur Shearly Cripps who became a mission priest in Zimbabwe and had such a deep sense of compassion for the black Africans amongst whom he lived that he became known as the '*S. Francis of the African Countryside*'. Fr. Cripps wrote this moving devotion to the Sacred Heart:

*O Heart of Jesus, Sacred, Passionate,
Anguish it was, yet anguish that was bliss,
To love them heart to heart, each selfish heart,
To clasp them close, and pray in utter truth –
'Father, forgive, they know not what they do.'*

COMPASSIONATE HEARTS OF JESUS AND MARY

Recently someone wrote to me about the way she realised her heart was growing harder.

'About six years ago', she said, 'I became troubled that my heart was becoming like stone, and I made a conscious choice to change this situation. I knew that only God could help me on this one, and He did.'

She went on to observe: *'I've noticed that, as some people get older, they become increasingly bitter and resentful about what life hurls at them. They may even choose to have hatred running in their lives. It sort of energises them and keeps them going.'*

Personally I had noticed something similar in some people's attitudes towards those of other nationalities – and especially towards refugees and immigrants following Brexit. And I reflected on something the Holy Father wrote last year: "*Jesus' only judgement*" he said, "*is one filled with mercy and compassion.*"

Yet re-making one's heart isn't easy, which is why the need to do so lies at the heart of ours and every faith. As one great Scottish evangelist wrote: *'To refuse to be continuously converted puts a stumbling block in the growth of our spiritual life. There are areas of self-will in our lives where our pride pours contempt on the throne of God and says, "I won't submit."* (Oswald Chambers)

So to help people in this need for 'constant conversion of the heart' – the centre of our being – a new, online *Spiritual Association of the Compassionate Hearts of Jesus and Mary* has been created – to provide the means whereby members can 'soften' their hearts and develop a compassionate heart for the sake of the world. It costs nothing to join, there are no meetings to attend and details can be found in this month's *Parish Newsletter*. Please, will you consider joining?

CONCLUSION

In the end devotion to the Sacred Heart is simply about making *my* heart – the centre of *my* being, like Christ's. Nurturing within oneself His love and compassion. So the fact that the Sacred Heart has never had a place in the life of the Church of England is a cause for great sadness for it is our loss.

I've sometimes heard Anglicans speak in a rather smug and disparagingly way about the bright red image of the Sacred Heart, crowned by the cross, surrounded by fire and encircled with the Crown of Thorns. Too explicit; too graphic – especially when Jesus is shown holding it out for our gaze. Yet it clearly touches and provokes a response in hearts that are simpler and unbiased. When, for example, during a recent school retreat a child was asked why Jesus' heart should be shown outside His body he simply replied: *"Because he loves us so much he can't keep it in!"*

We may not have celebrated the Feast this year (maybe, next?!) but the reality of the Divine Compassion of Jesus is something we need to desire to flow in *our* hearts and be lived out in *our* lives. Perhaps we might ask ourselves what would it mean to have a heart like His? How can *my* heart become more "sacred"? For, in the end, the Sacred Heart is about understanding Jesus's love for me and all people and inviting me to love others as He did. So consider joining the Association, and pray that your heart might be more like the Heart of Jesus:

*O dearest Lord,
thy Sacred Heart with spear was pierced for me;
O pour thy Spirit in my heart that I may live for thee. Amen*

*Fr. John-Francis Friendship SMMS
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