

Homily for January 5, 2017

Yesterday John introduced a discussion about family likeness: the children of the devil act like the devil, and the children of the Father imitate the love of the Father.

Today he develops this theme by contrasting the hatred of Cain with the love of Abel.

The central idea of this passage is based on Jesus' teaching in John 15:13 where the Lord says:

Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

John, with this verse in mind, writes in today's reading:

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren

Some are called to a dying martyrdom, which consists of the total surrender of human life in a generous act of love and fidelity to the faith. Everyone, however, is called to a living martyrdom, which involves a lifetime of sacrifice for the love and benefit of others.

With this in mind, we can better understand John's reference to Cain.

This is the only direct reference to the Old Testament in 1 John. The actions of Cain constitute the first example of fraternal hatred in the Bible (Gen 4:1–16). His envy of Abel mirrored the devil's envy of Adam. We read in Wisdom 2:24:

through the devil's envy death entered the world,

The murderous act that ensued made him a child of the devil, who was a "murderer from the beginning" as Jesus says in John 8:44. John is saying that hatred among fellow Christians is on a par with homicide.

Cain showed his evil intent by slaying Abel. The Christian shows his or her loving intent by laying down their lives one for another. We will either slay the other or lay our lives down for the other.

Now just as most people are not called to a life of literal martyrdom and thus explicitly lay down their lives for Jesus and others, so to, most people will not explicitly murder another. The point is that if we harbour hatred in our heart towards others it is as good as killing them. Conversely, if we learn to show generosity and care for others, as the example of providing help for those in physical need, we are learning the way of laying down our lives for others.

Similarly, the person who is convicted of sin will bring that to the Father so that he or she can be forgiven. Here John perhaps has in mind a situation where a follower of Jesus knows they are harbouring hatred towards a brother or sister or did not show compassion towards someone in need. It was a time when they were not embodying what it means to be a living martyr. How are we to approach such a situation? Listen to John's beautiful words:

***By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him
20 whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows
everything.***

“When our hearts condemn” us is a reference to being convicted of sin. However, such a conviction should not dissuade us from being a living martyr. It is the opportunity to come before God, to ask for forgiveness and to renew our commitment to a life of love.

You see, the heart that convicts a believer of sin is beating with the truth. It responds with contrition and immediately seeks forgiveness from Christ. The refusal to admit sin is a sure sign of deception and alienation from the truth. Because God is greater than the power of sin, He has the power to cleanse our conscience and restore our confidence to approach him prayerfully with our needs.

This is the very thing John says in the next verse:

Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God;

Such confidence gives to us a renewed desire to love, “in word and speech, and in deed and in truth.”

There is one other point about this passage that I need to mention. For the person who is choosing to the way of living martyrdom, it will cause those who are of the devil to hate such a one.

These are John’s words:

Do not wonder, brethren, that the world hates you.

John says that this should not perturb us or cause us confusion. Those who are truly followers of Jesus and laying down their lives for others will result in those who are opposed to us to become angry and even aggressive towards us. However, when we are growing in love the condemnation of the world means less and less to us because we are living in the truth and grace of Jesus.

With John’s text resonating in our hearts let us this day renew our commitment to being living martyrs and so witness by word and deed to our Lord’s words:

Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.