

Solemnity of the Sacred Heart
June 8, 2018

Today is the solemnity of The Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. The feast dates back to the 11th century, but prior to the 17th century the devotion was embraced mainly by mystics such as St. Bernard of Clairvaux. In 1673, Margaret Mary Alacoque, received a vision of Jesus' compassionate heart, pierced by the sins of the world, which gave impetus to the devotion. In 1856 Pope Pius IX declared it a universal solemnity.

Today's Mass is best understood when seen in light of the appointed Gospel reading, especially this portion of John 19:

Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.

The spearing of Jesus' side involved the piercing of his heart. The church has always understood that it is from the Sacred Heart of Jesus that the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist originated. The water signifying Baptism and the blood signifying the Eucharist. These are the sacraments that form and sustain the Church and we can more fully appreciate them when we see their origin in the sacred heart of Jesus.

John in the Gospel says that God always intended for the heart of Jesus to be pierced. For in doing so the soldier fulfilled a prophecy from Zechariah.

They will look on the one whom they have pierced.

Our first two readings help us to understand that the piercing of Jesus show us that his love is extravagant and eternal.

Our reading from Hosea expresses to us the extravagance of God's love. In these words we have one of the most self-revealing passages from the Old Testament where the Lord God lays bare his love for his chosen people. Even though he knows they are wayward and at times oh so indifferent to him, rather than this resulting in his turning away from them, it intensifies his love for them. In these verses the extravagance of God's love expresses a deeply maternal character as God remembers:

The language here expresses a tender extravagance. Even though Ephraim, a name of endearment the Lord used when referring to Israel and also the name of Joseph's second son, did not recognize God's tender love, he stoops down to them leading them with cords of compassion and bands of love. Here is an anticipation of the incarnation – an anticipation that is intensified in these words that refer to Admah and Zeboiim. These were two of the surrounding pagan nations that were antagonistic towards Israel. He can't treat Ephraim like them. Rather he has the compassion towards them, that even though angered by Israel's sin and waywardness, this leads to a deepening of love. God went so far with this extravagant love that it finds its ultimate expression with the piercing of Jesus' heart on the Cross.

What does this mean for us? There may be some here today for whom you long for your own children, especially if they are adult children who are wayward and struggling with their lives in any number of ways. Perhaps they have acted in ways that have so angered you that you were at a place of saying that's it, I can't handle you anymore. And yet that parental compassion grows warm in you and you stoop down as you sacrificially continue to walk with them. It is this aspect of Jesus' sacred heart that allows you to identify with him in your agony for your own Ephraim. You know that such extravagant love is costly and very sacrificial.

We are all called to share in living out this extravagant love. But this can only happen if our own hearts are enveloped in the eternal love of Jesus. So St. Paul says in our reading from Ephesians:

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit,¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

Paul is giving one of the clearest expressions of the nature of Jesus' sacred heart found anywhere in the Bible. Jesus wants to so embrace us that we will know that interior strength whereby Christ dwells in our hearts through faith. And what is the result of such faith. That we will have power to understand how extensive and complete Christ's love is.

The four dimensions of Jesus' heart mentioned here are the four extensions of the Cross.

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth,

By height is meant heaven, by depth the underworld, by length and breadth the focus is on Jesus presence throughout history and so expresses that this love is eternal.

The Sacred Heart of Jesus invites us to recall the extravagant and eternal nature of his love. Jesus, true God and true man, loves the world with a human heart, a heart that serves as a channel for God's infinite love. Nobody has ever loved us more than Jesus does, nobody ever will love us more. He loved me, said Saint Paul, and gave himself for me. Each one of us can repeat the same words. His Heart is full of the Father's love – full in a way that is at once divine and human.