Silence, Colour, Sound

October 22nd, 2017

20th Sunday after Pentecost

In the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, we encounter three questions: *What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I do for Christ?* The letters that the apostle Paul wrote to the various churches all, in different ways, relate to these questions. These are the everyday questions of living faithfully, lovingly and hopefully in Jesus Christ. To the Thessalonians he writes: "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 1:6). They received the good news with joy in the Holy Spirit. What were the Thessalonians joyful about? The apostle says that the Thessalonians had "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming" (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). Not many people believe in the wrath that is coming these days, and not many people want to think about it, but wrath is coming. History repeatedly shows that the good times come to an end. The universe is winding down, and so are we. And the apostle says that the Lord Jesus has rescued us from all of this. The Thessalonians have found the God who truly lives and who saves the universe! There is nothing and nobody greater than Him to rejoice about. Imagine the immensity of what the good news is revealing to you. As John wrote: "And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world." (1 John 4:14). The magnitude of what God has done is the beginning, the starting point for even attempting to find the answers to the questions: *What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I do for Christ?* Because if Christ is not the Saviour of the universe, then why am I following Him and why do I need to ask these questions in the first place? The Thessalonians received the good news in joy, for they had found the ultimate joy—the joy of God. It was the truth that set them free (John 8:32). And this joy and freedom in God was very effective and productive in the church at Thessalonica.

The apostle praises these new Christians for their reception of the Gospel, for their imitation of what is good, for the way their lives have been transformed by salvation. In typical Pauline poetics, he mentions the triad we know so well from 1 Corinthians 13, saying: "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3). It is important for us to take a moment to think about what Paul really means when he uses these three words to speak to the Thessalonians, praising them for their work of faith, their labour of love, their steadfastness of hope. And such an examination, I am confident, gives us a way to begin to live with the questions: *What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I do for Christ?*

A work of faith is not to be confused with a work of Law. James had no qualms about saying that faith without works was dead (James 2:14-26), and Jesus himself taught: “Not everyone that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Works of faith are the works we do because we believe, because God does them through us, because faith naturally produces works. Works of faith are the manner in which we pray and live out the words *Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done* (Matthew 6:10); *Not my will, but thine be done* (Luke 22:42). Very well, but what does working faith look like? One recent film that challenges us to think about faith is the Martin Scorsese film *Silence*, which was based on the novel by the Japanese author Shusaku Endo. It details the trials of Portuguese Jesuits Father Garrupe and Father Rodrigues, who go in search of the apostate Ferreira in the area near Nagasaki in the late 17th Century, when the Tokugawa regime was mercilessly suppressing the Christian faith that had been the fastest growing religion in Japan. The film follows the book very well; and the story is both beautiful and terrible. Adam Garfield had to prepare for the role of Father Rodrigues, which I believe was a difficult role to play, for he is a very complicated character—both loveable and hateable. Father James Martin, S.J., who has penned a few books on spirituality, was called in to assist in the production of the film. And this is where things get interesting. Father Martin led Garfield through the *Spiritual Exercises* to prepare him for his role, and Garfield also underwent a full 30 day Ignatian retreat. When asked about this process, Garfield said: "On retreat, you enter into your imagination to accompany Jesus through his life from his conception to his crucifixion and resurrection. You are walking, talking, praying with Jesus, suffering with him. And it’s devastating to see someone who has been your friend, whom you love, be so brutalized" (https://cruxnow.com/interviews/2016/12/07/father-james-martin-on-movie-silence/). To enter the life of Father Rodrigues, Garfield had to enter somehow into the life of a Jesuit, and this meant entering into the life of Christ. In fact, the whole process of entering into the film was perhaps like entering into prayer. As Martin said: " The closest that I could come to describing this movie is like a prayer. It’s basically like living inside a prayer, participating in prayer and that’s to me the highest compliment. It draws you in. It really is like a Jesuit meditation. And that’s pretty amazing in a movie" (Ibid). This is how the Thessalonians came into faith. They entered into the life of the apostles, who were filled with the life of Christ. They entered into the Word of God. As Mary said to the angel, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38). When we come to God, we have to enter into His words, but we also enter into His silence. Both His revelation and His silence shape us, if we are willing to be shaped. Acting is *mimesis*, or imitation, in the beginning, but as the actor grows and the drama unfolds, it becomes much more than that. It becomes pure message, pure *angelia.* The work of faith is like this, we have knowns and unknowns to deal with, but we believe in the growth, we believe in the role we have been given, we believe that a story is unfolding that radiates the glory of God. It is to let the word of God shape you; to let the silence of God shape you, to enter into the prayer of Jesus. That is how Jesus lived. And Jesus said, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:29).

The great motivation for the Thessalonians was love. The love they had for the apostles and the love that they had received from God, the love they had for Jesus. Love is a fragile word, so easily tarnished by commonplaces or misconceptions about what it really is. And yet, Paul says "love never ends" (1 Corinthians 13:8). To me that suggests that love can even survive the nihilism, mindlessness and clichés of this world today. What is the labour of love that Paul speaks of? I was reminded of the life of Henri Matisse (1869-1954), one of the greatest artists of the 19th and 20th centuries. Even Picasso admitted that his only real rival or competitor was Matisse. Nevertheless, towards the end of his life, Matisse did not consider his plethora of paintings and prints to be his masterpiece. In his own view, his masterpiece was the Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence, a chapel he designed from 1947 to 1951 in southern France. And he designed almost everything—from the stained-glass windows to the vestments to the candlesticks to the architecture—and he was not even an architect! It began with suffering. In 1941, Matisse was treated for cancer, and had a difficult recovery from his surgery. A young nurse named Monique Bourgeois helped him through this terrible period, and even posed for him a few times. Their relationship was brutally honest. When Matisse first asked Monique's opinion of his drawings and paintings, she said: "Monsieur, I like the colors a lot, but the drawings not so much." (http://www.artnews.com/2005/12/01/matisse-and-the-nun/). Matisse loved her reply, and they became good friends. Some years later, Monique entered the Dominican convent at Vence, taking the name Sister Jacques-Marie. Matisse was not thrilled about her religious vocation. Nevertheless, when she asked for his advice regarding the convent's need to build a new chapel, he took on the project with a great passion. And in building this chapel, he did not forget the colors that his younger friend had liked so much: "During the next five years, the artist became obsessed with the minute details of the chapel. Sister Jacques-Marie built a plywood model, one-tenth the size, following Matisse’s instructions, and he used it to design all the elements of the building. The motifs in the sapphire blue, emerald green, and lemon yellow stained-glass windows were chosen from three studies. Matisse even designed the priest’s brightly colored vestments, with the aid of Sister Jacques-Marie, who kept the original gouaches and silk swatches in a trunk in her office" (Ibid). It was not merely a gift to his friend—it was collaboration, a true labor of love. As another writer has noted, Matisse "considered it 'the achievement of an entire life's work, the outcome of tremendous, difficult, sincere work'. It might have been the pinnacle of his career, but the Vence Chapel was also a way for Matisse to use his talents to produce a heartfelt gift." (http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/henri-matisse-and-the-nun-why-did-the-artist-create-a-masterpiece-for-sister-jacques-marie-9217486.html). At the end of the day, a labour of love is a work of friendship—one friend speaking to another friend through actions and through gift, a way of praising the greatness of the friendship and love itself because it illuminates and vivifies so much. That is how it is with Jesus. Life is not always what we want it to be—we may not like the way life draws things, but perhaps we can love the colours. And perhaps we can give in ways that transcend mere duty, mere virtue signalling or mere profit by, now and then, giving and working because we love Christ—Christ who lives in our hearts and Christ who has overcome the world for those we love.

Christ also calls us to live in hope. The apostle spoke to the Colossians about the glorious mysterious of Christ living in us, which is "the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). To live in Christ is to first have Christ living in you and to know this tremendous hope. Such hope is not a mere word or a manufactured emotion. Today we tend to look on hope as something we build to make life better. Life will be better if we somehow master the right tools or life hacks. This is leading to our utter enslavement by technology and our utter loss of hope. The carriage is before the horse. Hope builds technology, and technology can help us build more hope, but technology is not hope itself. Hope is the disposition that enables us to keep building. Hope is the confidence of patience that transcends the arduousness and brutal silence of the tasks at hand. Long before we had our modern telecommunications, there were attempts to lay cable between Europe and North America—what came to be known as the Transatlantic Cable. Before this, messages were sent by ships—and it would take days or weeks to get a telegram from England to Canada or the United States. It took nine difficult years and five attempts to lay the Transatlantic Cable—one in 1857, two in 1858, one in 1865, and one in 1866. Lasting connections were finally achieved with the 1866 mission. On August 16, 1858, the first message radiated great hope: "Europe and America are united by telegraphy. Glory to God in the highest; on earth, peace and good will toward men." The next day Queen Victoria sent President James Buchanan a congratulatory message. It was only 98 words and took 17 hours to send. The following month, the cable had deteriorated and transmission was no longer possible. Only one month! Seven years later, n 1865, the ship *Great Eastern* with Captain James Anderson went to sea to lay the new cable. This was an enormous ship with three gigantic iron tanks for holding the cable. On July 15th, after paying out almost 2000 km of cable, it snapped and the end was lost. The *Great Eastern* had to return to England. A year later, on July 13th, the *Great Eastern* started laying a new cable. This time the weather was terrible and the work extremely difficult. Besides laying the new cable, the *Great Eastern* was also determined to find the lost cable from the year before and to connect it to Newfoundland: "On August 9 *Great Eastern* put to sea again, in order to grapple the lost cable of 1865, and complete it to Newfoundland. They were determined to find it. There were some who thought it hopeless to try, declaring that to locate a cable two-and-a-half miles down would be like looking for a small needle in a large haystack. Robert Halpin navigated the ship to the correct location. For days, *Great Eastern* moved slowly here and there, 'fishing' for the lost cable with a grappling hook at the end of a stout rope. Suddenly, the cable was 'caught' and brought to the surface, but while the men cheered it slipped from the hook and vanished again. It was not until a fortnight later that it was once more fished up; it took 26 hours to get it safely on board *Great Eastern* again. The cable was carried to the electrician's room, where it was determined that the cable was connected. All on the ship cheered or wept as rockets were sent up into the sky to light the sea. The recovered cable was then spliced to a fresh cable in her hold, and paid out to Heart's Content, Newfoundland, where she arrived on Saturday, September 7. There were now two working telegraph lines" (*Wikipedia*). Nine years, five attempts, and multiple failures. All for the little sound of the telegraph clicking. And yet those little sounds produced the voice that read out: "Glory to God in the highest; on earth, peace and good will toward men." These labours were the forerunner of our own telecommunications—that network of voices we hear from around the world. That is the steadfastness of hope. It is a hard sell today when everything seems so easy to accomplish, so easy to judge by its apparent merit or lack thereof in nanoseconds. Real things are built by real hope and require time. And as one spiritual director, Fr. Raymond Gawronski says, "Time is one of the few things we can give to God." The steadfastness of hope means that we give our time to Christ and abide in Him even when immediate results do not materialize—we trust God enough to know that we are laying good cable, that we can always fish up the lost cables if necessary, but that no matter what happens, we will give the world the gift of sound— the sound of voices responding to discovering the voice of God, the sound of voices discovering themselves, the sound of voices truly conversing rather than monologically talking at each other. Voices that truly communicate, "speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19).

Silence, colour, sound. These are some of the ways Christ calls to us and shapes us through works of faith, labours of love and the steadfastness of hope. This is how we receive and live the good news with joy in the Holy Spirit. I began with the Ignatian questions: *What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I do for Christ?* These can only be answered when you sincerely and lovingly remember what Christ has done for you, what Christ is doing for you, and what Christ will do for you through His own eternal and boundless faith, hope and love. To Him be glory and honour forever. Amen.