

A TWO-LETTER WORD, BUT SO IMPORTANT

As in any language there are certain words which are frequently used, but are seldom reflected upon. They slip off the tongue so easily and are simply taken for granted that they seem to need no explanation. They just somehow define themselves. In the Gospel of John there is one sentence which stands out as almost defining his whole message. It is a sentence which everyone has read or heard countless times that it seldom if ever seems to warrant reflection. It is a sentence that should be a part of the thinking of every believer. It is a sentence which really defines not only Catholic belief, but permeates all of theology. And just what is this sentence?

God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

That word is "so". The dictionary devotes almost a quarter of a page in trying to cover all the usages and definitions of this simple word. It can mean "truth", as in "that is so." It can be equivalent to "and" or "the same" as in "so too &." Among all the numerous definitions and examples, the way it is used in that sentence from John, it means giving the following word an emphasis or a stress as in phrases such as "I am so happy, or so sad, or I am so tired, etc." Thus John emphasizes what the true love of God is, that it is so great that his love is beyond what we humans can even imagine. It means that God went to the extreme, to the absolute limit, in showing his love for the human race, in spite of the fact that Adam and Eve had deliberately thwarted his original plan of Creation. God's plan was so much more than just a simple forgiveness of the sin. That was certainly given immediately, but then God wanted to heal the harm done by that sin, to restore his original plan, not to please himself, but to make it possible for all future humans to know that while sin and its effects would still remain, there was now a genuine hope that the ultimate destiny of humans would still remain totally intact. And in fact, God's actions would actually enhance his work of creation by showing in a most dramatic manner how his love could never be lessened by any sin!

This was accomplished by God doing the unthinkable, almost the impossible. As St. Paul puts it, God did not think that his divinity was something that he had to cling to, but rather that he would empty himself by taking on a human nature, becoming one with his human creation, exactly like them in every way but absolutely free of all sin or its effects. God planned from the very beginning that he would become a man. Man had sinned; man had to make up for it and restore the right order, but man was in no way equal to God. He could do nothing! Therefore by God becoming a man while still remaining God, in his human nature he could undo the harm of that first sin and restore man's destiny. In the Garden of Eden, God leaves a cryptic message that one day this would happen. He spoke to the snake (the devil) that one day the offspring of the woman would crush his head while he would nip at his heel.

God was patient and he waited centuries upon centuries as the offspring of Adam and Eve began to cover the world and grow in number. A little less than forty centuries would pass when God then stepped into human history with the call of Abraham who listened to God and had total faith in him. Four more centuries would pass and then the ultimate plan of God was revealed with the Angel Gabriel coming to a virgin, Mary, to announce to her that she was chosen to be the mother of the Messiah, the mother of God! All heaven waited to hear

her answer and when she spoke she simply said: "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me as you say." And at that moment, God became a man, the tiniest of organisms now beginning human life within the womb of now his mother, Mary.

For thirty years, that tiny baby grew into a man, taken care of and brought up by Mary his mother and Joseph his foster father. He was hidden from the world, but then one day, he began his public life. For three years he would traverse the length and breadth of the land of Israel. He quickly gathered twelve men to be his closest followers, his Apostles. His message was something new; it was predominantly about love in action. And it raised a quiet uproar among the leaders who sensed it was a threat to their authority and way of life. Ultimately they plotted to do away with him and finally in desperation, had him condemned to death on a cross. All this had been foretold by the prophets, but when it all happened, their words were forgotten. Jesus had explained numerous times to his Apostles that he had to go to Jerusalem where he would give his life to save a world, but that would not be the end for he would then rise from the dead, encourage his followers, establish his church, rise into heaven and then send the Holy Spirit to guide his Church until the end of time.

God being infinite could have saved the world in any number of ways which would not include his giving his life. But no, he would do precisely that. "Greater love than this no man has than to lay down his life for his friends" he told his Apostles several times. He would go the extra mile, he would do the impossible, he would show the depths of his love, his infinite, everlasting love. His love as a human being, his love as God, his love as creator of the human world. His actually doing what he said he would do, suffer and die, was beyond human understanding, yet that is precisely what he did. His followers were stunned, speechless, and for a number of days were simply lost in their tears, their sorrow and in their faith. Their mantra was "we had hoped!"

But then came the final unbelievable event, the resurrection of Jesus who would now live forever, never to die again. And this was his promise that all who believed in him and would follow him would all in the end rise with him to live forever with him in heaven and eternity. Hard to believe but all this is contained in that two letter word in that sentence from John in his Gospel - "God so loved the world . . ." That is what the Church throughout the world proclaimed and celebrated this past Easter. But even more, it also celebrated the fact that all believers are truly going to ultimately live, die and rise again to be with their savior and lord, their God and their lover, for time and eternity. This is not a frivolous hope, a pie in the sky sort of thing. It is our faith, our belief, our hope, our destiny. And it is all fired by divine and eternal love, an infinite love, a genuine love, and even a human love, for Christ was both God and man.

All this is our faith but it can take a lifetime for it all to really sink in and be a part of our daily lives. This just does not happen; it means that each one must think about this, pray about this, mull it over time and again, until it becomes part of the warp and woof of each one's being. This is God's plan. It will happen and each one must constantly remind themselves of it. Our faith must permeate our daily lives, not just at a Sunday Mass. This is the call of Easter, the call of this Easter season. Stand up, be counted, live the hope, have the risen Lord with you, talk to him, enjoy!

Fr. Andy, S.J.