

First Reading: 2Chr 36, 14-17.19-23

Second Reading: Eph 2, 4-10

Gospel: Jn 3,14-21

Love and Justice- a lesson from the Church Social Teaching

Someone told me once that if there is one very over-used and under-valued word in English, it would be the word “love.” I don’t know if that would be true for “cikondi” in ciNyanja or “luyando” in ciTonga, or “lilato” in siLozi, or “citemwiko” in ciBemba, or any other local Zambian language!

But it is unfortunate that many people use the word “love” in a way that blurs its very profound meaning – at least in my opinion! Do you ever hear expressions like this: “I love chocolate cake! I would love to kill that guy! I love the way you fix your new hairdo! I want to make love with you tonight rather than with my wife (meaning having sex!)”

So it might be difficult to fully appreciate the very powerful and very beautiful expression we heard in the Gospel reading from John for this Fourth Sunday of Lent. “God so loved the world...” A love so complete, so total, so unreserved, so full, that God would send his only Son Jesus that you and I and the whole human race might have life – even if that would mean Jesus would have to give up his human life through death on a cross!

St. Paul tells us the same thing in today’s Second Reading: “God loved us with so much love that he was generous with his mercy: when we were dead through our sins, he brought us to life with Christ....”

We Christians here in Zambia experience every day that great love, when we wake up alive in the morning, when we move through the day able to face the many, many challenges, when we look back at the end of the day with thanksgiving for God’s gifts and mercies. Indeed, every breath of air I draw is a reminder of God’s loving act of creating me. And that’s true even when things seem to go wrong, when many social and economic and political problems bring me low, when I might even wonder what is really the meaning of life.

For me, that’s why the Church is so important, the Christian community that you and I belong to. For to truly be the Church of Jesus Christ, we must be a Church of love! And that really is what the Second African Synod is all about – enabling the Church here in Zambia, all over Africa, to be a Church of love by being a Church “in service of reconciliation, justice and peace.”

How do I see this link between love and the justice being promoted through the African Synod? I’m really helped by the explanation given many years ago in an earlier Synod of Bishops that gathered to discuss the mission of the Church. To summarise in simple terms what that Synod said: “Love of neighbour is an absolute demand for justice, since I cannot really love my neighbour unless I want my neighbour’s dignity respected, rights protected, development enhanced and well-being promoted – and these are all matters of social justice!”

So for our Church in Zambia to be a Church of love it must be a Church of justice, a Church in service to reconciliation, justice and peace. The preparatory document for the Second African Synod says it very well: “In proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, a commitment to reconciliation, justice and peace appears to be where this Kingdom of Love is to be realised: “...the Kingdom of God... means righteousness and peace and joy brought by the Holy Spirit” (*Romans 14:17ff*) (Lineamenta #4).

But where do we learn about how this love is supposed to manifest itself in justice? Some of us might say that we never heard anything about this in the catechism classes we took or in the ordinary Sunday homilies we hear in the churches we attend. Well, that's a very fair question to raise. We can honestly and humbly admit that as a Church we haven't always made this clear link between love and justice. And that is why the Second African Synod is going to be looking very sharply about the faith formation that our local churches provide. Central to that formation is what we call the *church's social teaching* (CST) or social doctrine.

The Synod's preparatory document is filled with the call for authentic formation in the CST. For example, "Through its social doctrine, the Church faithfully carries out its specific mission to be the reflection of God's love in the world for every human being" (*Lineamenta* #42). The Second African Synod "ought to enable us to increase awareness of the close connection between the Church's mission and human promotion, if the Church's social doctrine is to be applied to everyday life" (*Lineamenta* #40).

This CST is found in the Bible and also in the statements of our Popes and other church leaders. Sometimes the CST has been called our Church's "best kept secret." But that shouldn't be so here in Zambia, since our Bishops, often in cooperation with other church bodies, have given us an influential collection of pastoral letters on important social issues like elections, the constitution, the economy.

One very good way for our Small Christian Communities to prepare for the Second African Synod is to reflect on some of those pastoral letters. We can find ourselves more and more a Church of love because we will be a Church of justice!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING IN SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

- How would you define true love? Can you give some good practical examples of love that you have experienced?
- Which is more important for the Church to promote these days in Zambia, love or justice?
- Do you know much about the Church's Social Teaching (CST)? Where would you go to find out more about this CST?

SKETCH

Have three people in a very lively discussion. One is holding up a manifesto of a political party. The second is pointing to the headlines in a newspaper. And the third is reading some passages from the Bible. Eventually the first two stop talking and begin listening to the third – and eventually all are smiling and shaking hands.

COMMUNITY PRAYERS

- We pray, Lord, that we may see clearly the link between love and justice and not be afraid to promote social justice around us. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray, Lord, that the Church's social teaching may be better known and more widely followed here in Zambia. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray, Lord, that Zambia's preparations for the Second African Synod will be better known and more influential. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*