

EASTER 6
May 29th, 2011

*A sermon preached by Fr. John-Francis Friendship SCP
at S. Andrew's Church, Romford*

INTRODUCTION

The fact that I've never been to Lakeside must make me almost unique. That's not to say I'm not fascinated by shopping malls. I am. I wonder at the jaw-dropping pictures of enormous centres developing around the world and watch with fascination the development of Westfield City in Stratford. I have heard of the vast expanse of retail outlets it will house and wonder at the way people are drawn to such places, places which are no longer just 'retail centres' but 'leisure facilities'. They even have something almost religious about them.

Studies have been made which show there's a religious element to the experience of visiting these places which is akin to the act of making a pilgrimage. Special buses are laid on to carry people to where they desire to be; one enters with a sense of awe into the great cavernous spaces, often centred on a domed structure, marvelling at the array of side chapels dedicated to Next, Dixons or Toys-R-Us. Devotees visit each in turn to experience what they offer (as if one were visiting the Chapel of the Sacred Heart or our Lady) regardless of whether a purchase is to be made. And, at the centre of it all, lie's the goal of the pilgrimage – Debenhams. Or John Lewis... Some shrines are so holy one hardly dare enter. One simply gazes in wonder at Burberry's or Harrods realising that these are only to be entered on Holy Days – at Christmas for presents.

It's easy to see the connections and some people, clearly, find great satisfaction in simply visiting these places. They are the cathedrals of a secular age that serve our needs. But most of us realise that they cannot satisfy our deepest desires. Shopping isn't the panacea for our ills. Anyone who seeks to live on anything but the surface of life realises we need something deeper. S. Paul, gazing at the array of temples built to a variety of gods recognised people thirst for that which would answer their needs.

But gods made by human hands – whether in Athens or Lakeside – cannot, in the end do that. We may find momentary relief but the human spirit yearns for something deeper. There is a sense of an 'Unknown God' who does not live in shrines but whose Spirit seeks to unite to the One in whom 'we live and move and have our being'. (*Acts 17:28*)

GOD INVITES US INTO UNION WITH HIM

Once we realise that we have a deeper need that is fed by a desire for 'at-oneness' with God – or Life or the Other or whatever you want to call that 'Unknown God' – then we can begin the inner journey which eventually leads us to union with the whole of creation. God is constantly reaching out, inviting us into a deeper relationship with Him.

I love those words we heard from St. John's gospel because they speak of the way God is working to unite Himself with us: *"If you love me you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate (that is His Spirit) to be with you forever."* (*14: 15-16*)

"If you love me"; that's all it needs! Do we love God? Do we open our hearts to Him? Do we desire Him who is the well-spring of life? The writer, C.S. Lewis, said of what he called the 'sweet desire' that 'the one thing one longs for once the desire has gone is to have it again.' It is 'sweet' because

it leaves us with a deep a sense of satisfaction. We want to return to the source of that satisfaction not because it was momentary (unlike so many of our purchases from Lakeside) but because it has awoken a deep desire for life within us. Here we are touching the source of Love who wants to make us equal with Him. Spiritual writers all agree that the sign of God's presence is a desire for God. If you want to pray, you are already praying. The desire to pray is the evidence that God is already at work, at prayer, in you.

HOW CAN WE HEAR THIS CALL OF DIVINE LOVE?

So how can we know that God is working within us? Well, God speaks to us through our deepest human experiences - our feelings, desires, thoughts, or ideas. So to become more aware of these is to become aware of God's work in them and then to offer ourselves through them to God.

If we are becoming open to our need for at-oneness with God, to be intimate with the source of Life, then we need to be intimate with ourselves. The journey to God is a journey into my own heart. We need to get in touch with our own deepest self so that we can give ourselves more truly to another. It is important to get in touch with our deepest human experiences because that is where God is present to us. Where *we* are most present, God is most present.

So in prayer we discover more of ourselves. We realise more truly what we already have. What we need is to experience what we already possess: *"The more self-awareness one has, the more alive one is."* (Rollo May)

THE LOVE OF GOD AND THE LOVE OF OTHERS

This 'opening' to the call of Divine Love also requires us to reach out, in love, to others. Another 'test' of our growing relationship with God is that we have a growing desire to love one another. We may fail – we will realise that we make mistakes and get it wrong. But there will be that desire within us. *"They who have my commandments and keep them",* says Jesus, *"are those who love me, and those who love me will be loved by my Father and I will love them and reveal myself to them."* (Jn. 14:21)

It is this matter of desire that lies at the heart of our relationship with God. Desire for God and all that moves us towards life in all its fullness. This is the way to discovering God in all things and this is the way to increasing reverence to created things. That is why it is so important that we develop our spiritual life. Why we are invited not just to say our prayers but to let our lives *become* a prayer. That is not to say that we should ignore the importance of setting aside time for prayer. Far from it. If it is true that what we truly desire is what we will give expression to in our lives then it is equally true that the way we express ourselves in life will nourish those desires. And prayer – that fundamental expression of our desire for union with God – will nurture the way we live for it will open us up to what lies deepest in our hearts. What we truly desire. And, in so doing, we can discern between the conflicting desires which move us towards or away from God, the source of all good.

CONCLUSION

"If you love me you will keep my commandments." And they are very simple. To love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbour as ourselves. The threefold way of love – God, neighbour and self. All are to be loved for all are meant to find their meaning in relation to the other.

These readings this morning point us to the way in which all people have within them a desire for something beyond themselves – that which has been described as the ‘Unknown God’. Whatever is less than that will never fully satisfy: whatever is a reflection of the unknown God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ will satisfy and draw our desires towards attaining union with Him.

There is a famous hymn which is based on a prayer by the great Ignatian saint, Francis Xavier, that I want to leave you with. It’s 498* in your hymn books. I’ll leave you with four verses to reflect on
*(*Celebration Hymnal for Everyone)*

1. My God, I love Thee; not because
I hope for Heav’n thereby,
Nor yet because who love Thee not
May eternally die.

4. Then why, O blessèd Jesus Christ
Should I not love Thee well?
Not for the hope of winning Heaven,
Nor of escaping hell.

5. Not with the hope of gaining aught,
Nor seeking a reward,
But as Thyself hast lovèd me,
O everlasting Lord!

6. E’en so I love Thee, and will love,
And in Thy praise will sing,
Solely because Thou art my God,
And my eternal King.

Amen.