

LOVE BADE ME WELCOME

The title of this retreat is taken from a beautiful poem by George Herbert simply called "Love."

I would like to read it for you and then offer some reflections. You'll find the text in the pdf that goes with this retreat and that will be available on the internet after the talk is over.

Love

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
from my first entrance in,
drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
if I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth, Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.
(George Herbert)

The scene of the poem is that of a banquet, a feast, a celebration of life and belonging, to which the author is invited. But he holds back, stays on the edge, afraid of going in.

The poem begins: "*Love bade me welcome*"
It is "Love" who invites, making it clear that this is what is most essentially true of God. "God is love," as St John says (1 John 4:16). How easily we forget that, lose sight of that, or fail to apply it to ourselves. "God is love." It is Love who takes the initiative and bids us welcome, who invites each of us to the feast of life, to enter into a celebration of joy, freedom and belonging, to step inside and join wholeheartedly in the dance of life. "*Love bade me welcome*" – the invitation is profoundly personal, it is to me, as I am.

"But I drew back..."

How often that is true of us. We don't give ourselves wholeheartedly because we feel somehow too imperfect, things have gone wrong, we don't really belong, we don't have the right to be content with life. We don't feel like we could be fully welcomed, that we are really worthy of joy. I am, after all, "guilty of dust and sin." Somehow I am just not quite enough.

"Quick-eyed love, observing me grow slack from my first entrance in, drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning, if I lacked anything."

Love is a very caring and observant host, quick to notice us as we hold back, and as we draw back he draws nearer to us, concerned for us. “Is there something wrong? Do you lack anything?” The answer is very sad: “A guest worthy to be here.” Love’s response to this is very simple and very beautiful: “You shall be he.” You are that guest, worthy to be here. This is the most fundamental truth, this is what God sees when he looks at us – someone he welcomes wholeheartedly and unreservedly, someone he welcomes more completely and more joyfully than we could ever imagine. The poem could stop there...

But it’s not enough for us – it never is. We need convincing. We need a chance to let the full truth really sink in. There is a journey to be undergone, a process of gradual learning, before we really believe it... There is in the poem a progression, a gradually deepening realization of the depth of God’s forgiveness and the completeness of his welcome.

And so the poem continues with the guest asking the same fundamental question at ever increasing depth. “Are you sure?” “Surely you can’t mean me?”

(a) *“I the unkind, ungrateful?”*

We can add whatever we want to that list! Look at who I am, all my faults, failures, my shortcomings, weaknesses, the ways in which I am not how I would like to be. *“I cannot look on thee.”*

At this point there is a beautiful gesture, “Love” reaches out to touch me, “takes my hand smiling” and says simply, but *“Who made the eyes but I?”* Who made you as you are? Who has given you everything, trust me... I created you, I do not make rubbish.

(b) Yes, we say, that may be true, but look what I’ve done with what you created - the mistakes I’ve made, the ways I’ve messed things up, the ugliness I have proved capable of. *“Truth Lord, I have marred those eyes, let my shame go where it doth deserve.”*

Shame is such a strong word, deeper than guilt. It’s not just a sense of: “I have done something wrong.” It goes deeper to a sense of there *is* something wrong with me which can be paralyzing. Love does not deny, doesn’t cover over what I might have done, or the darkness that may be within me. Love doesn’t pretend it isn’t there. That wouldn’t be honest. That would be too trite, wouldn’t do justice to our real human experience of pain and of real need. Instead of covering anything over, Love’s answer is stunning.

“And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?”

Who has paid the price – for even your ugliness, your sin? I have – you are completely free. You do not need to carry that burden – I have taken it onto myself. We remember the words in the prophet Isaiah:

“Ours were the sufferings he bore,
ours the sorrows he carried.
He was pierced through for our faults, crushed for our sins.
On him lies a punishment that brings us peace,
and by his wounds we are healed.”
(Isaiah 53:4-5)

“Then I will serve.”

(c) But still **we hold back**, can't really believe the full extent of the way God welcomes us and honours us. "Then I will *serve*," we say. Like the prodigal son who thinks he is no longer worthy to be called his father's son and who thinks that to come back as one of his father's hired servants is good enough for him. What does he find when he finally has the courage and the humility to come home? A father waiting anxiously for his son to return, probably waiting and looking each day just in case today might be the day. His father sees him while he is still a long way off and runs eagerly towards him. As someone put it: "Only a broken man would run while his son walks." Love is the more vulnerable one! He runs and embraces him. "Quick," he says "Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening and kill it; we are going to have a feast, a celebration. My son was lost and is found, he has come home." (Luke 15:22-24) Everything he had disowned is given back to him.

"Then I will serve," we are tempted to say...
No, says Love, "You must sit down, and taste my meat."

Sit. You will not serve me. No. I will serve you.

And at last it is enough - the full truth finally dawns, the full extent of Love's welcome is at last accepted. The invited guest is now free at last to enter into the kingdom, to take part wholeheartedly in the feast of life, the feast Love has prepared for him to enjoy. In the end it is very very simple. Sit and eat!

"So I did sit and eat."

Now the celebration can begin. No doubt a wonderful, joyful occasion. To be home, truly home at last! And no doubt the conversation between Love and the guest continues. What do they talk about? What more does Love have to say? We don't know but we can imagine how wonderful it was.

When George Herbert placed all his poems together for a friend to look at, he deliberately put this one right at the end. The message is clear – Love is always the final and most important word.

The poem is about you and me, about all of us. About how welcome we all are and the feast that awaits us. We are reminded of the beautiful promise in the Prophet Isaiah:

On this mountain,
the Lord of Hosts will prepare for all peoples
a banquet of rich food, a banquet of fine wines,
of food rich and juicy, of fine strained wines.
On this mountain he will remove
the mourning veil covering all peoples,
and the shroud enwrapping all nations,
he will destroy Death for ever.
The Lord will wipe away
the tears from every cheek;
he will take away his people's shame
everywhere on earth,
for the Lord has said so.

That day, it will be said: See, this is our God
in whom we hoped for salvation;
the Lord is the one in whom we hoped.
We exult and we rejoice
that he has saved us.

(Isaiah 25:6-10)

Suggestions for the day

Live this day in the knowledge of how welcome you are. There is nothing to prove, nothing to hide. Know that the Lord, Love, is there waiting to welcome you, wanting you to discover the joy he intends for you. You stand on the edge of the kingdom of heaven. Step inside.

Perhaps you might reflect on what are the things that make you “draw back” from Love’s welcome, that hold you back from the feast of life. Perhaps share them with Him, letting yourself hear the answers Love gives in the poem.

God’s love for us is always more than we can imagine, always surpasses the limits we imagine to be there. A monk called Columba Stewart once said something very wise: “We find that the masks we put on ourselves and the masks we see on the face of God are, in the end, the same, and are of our own making.” What are the ways in which you have underestimated God’s love for you?

Perhaps spend some time imagining what sort of conversation you would have with the Lord at that feast, when you finally “sit and eat.” What would you say to him, and He to you?

To take the opportunity to reflect on yourself. Am I a person of forgiveness? How do I welcome people? How do I create a place where people can feel at home? How do I notice their needs and respond to them? How am I a presence of Love for people?

Take some time to read the poem again slowly, or Isaiah’s account of the banquet that God has prepared for us (Isaiah 25:6-10) or else the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).

May God be with you and bless you throughout this day.