

2018 31st SUNDAY

The first Commandment is to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, with all of our soul and with all of our strength. You may nod in agreement as you hear this. But there are a lot of people who see it as pie in the sky stuff.

Recently after a funeral a gentleman, a complete stranger to me, said to me that while it was all very well for me to talk about the joy of heaven, he didn't want much to go to heaven. All that raising of hands, bowing and worshipping, for all eternity, didn't seem much of a prospect to him. It just left him cold.

In total contrast to that gentleman I remember visiting Fr. Albert, a Franciscan priest, who was in hospital after a serious heart attack. I asked him what sort of day he had had. He said, 'Wonderful! My heart stopped three times and each time I felt myself being drawn into a long white tunnel and a beautiful sense of peace enveloped me.' I could see excitement on his face. He seemed quite disappointed that he had not been allowed to continue on that journey. Fr. Albert is still alive and makes no secret of his longing for life with God in heaven.

The negative comment of that man triggered a thought in me. In the 14th century, Julian of Norwich, one of the greatest mystics in the history of the Church said that we must all pray deeply for the gift of longing. She saw longing for an ever deeper intimacy as the foundation stone of any relationship with God.

To long to be with God, to long to abide in God, to long to see God face to face in order to love God with every fibre of our being has to be at the heart of our spiritual life.

But such a longing can be easily stifled. When our thoughts are continually centred on sport or motorcars or fashion or the Gym or politics or business or cooking then we leave little space for God and we begin to think like the gentleman I have just referred to.

We all need to pray constantly for a deeper and ever deeper yearning for the Lord.

There are two fundamental truths: God loves us absolutely and unconditionally and we have been gifted with free-will. We have the power to accept or reject God's Love.

When I die, I want to go to heaven with all guns blazing; with my heart on fire with love for God. I'm sure you do too.

But how do we know whether or not we are in love with God?

It is Jesus' clear teaching in today's Gospel that our love for God and our love for our neighbour are interdependent. St John makes this very clear in his first Letter when he says: "If anyone says 'I love God' but hates his brother or sister, then that person is a liar."

Bob knew a lot about cars. He knew for a fact that his Holden was worth, at the most, \$800. A month back the back axle had been damaged when he had hit a speed bump at 100k. He had done a skilful cover-up job on it but, clearly, it was time to sell. He got some car valets in who got the car looking a treat. A teen-age girl who knew little about cars responded to his advert and Bob succeeded in getting \$3,000 from her for it. There was never a mention of the dodgy axle- 'Buyer beware' was Bob's motto.

Christmas was approaching so Bob came to Confession. ' Bless me Father. Just the usual: a few distractions at prayer, a few smutty jokes at work, sworn once or twice. That's it."

No mention of the injustice to the girl and of putting her life at risk by selling her a dodgy car.

For Bob religion is divorced from real life. Does Bob love God? St John would say a resounding: "No!"

Our love for God is expressed through our love for our Neighbour. Bob's ripping off of that young woman was an offence against love and a sign that his love for God is just pretence.

A man goes to an Irish pub and cries his eyes out when 'Mother Macree' is sung. Yet the same man never visits his own mother in the rest-home and brow-beats her if she should ever ring him. Does he love God? The answer is 'No'.

To love God is to see the face of Christ in the desperate migrants fleeing from poverty and oppression. It is to see the face of Christ in our querulous aged mother in the rest-home, in the credulous young woman coming to buy her first car. Love is not crying when 'Mother Macree' is sung. It is treating our neighbour- no matter how difficult we might find that person to be- as Christ.

God says to me and to you: "Do you love Me with all of your heart, all of your soul and all of your strength?"

I say, "Yes, Lord, You know I love You."

He says: "Well stop playing games with me. Forgive your sister for the time she ripped you off. Treat your ill-mannered son with compassion."