



2024 Lent Reflections

Week 6

"Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." - John 15:13

There is something about driving in traffic that brings out my least merciful side. All of a sudden many of my fellow drivers become highly unlovable creatures and I find myself asking my steering wheel why these people are so annoying.

I would love to say this is as far as my people-intolerance goes. Yet, when faced with someone who parents differently to me, or a keyboard foe on social media, again I am tempted to wonder how people can be so wrong about ...everything! It is thus that those I encounter regularly may start to become unlovable to my curmudgeonly heart.

Your struggles with your neighbour may be entirely different to mine, but the truth is there is always someone entirely unlovable in our lives, to whom the bonds of charity just cannot seem to stretch. And yes, if we are being perfectly truthful we will acknowledge that the unlovable one can even be in one's own family. Frankly, they often are.

I know I am in good company because even St Therese of Lisieux writes about how a nun in her convent annoyed her so much that the effort of being patient with this nun caused St Therese to perspire.

Many years ago I used to attend a young adults Holy Hour each week. It was a mixed bag of people who would regularly attend, and they included one young man who, in his own peculiar way, was rather over-affectionate and eager to please everyone he met. During the sung prayers, this young man would sing at the top of his lungs. The trouble, for me at least, was that he was essentially tone deaf. In that beautiful chapel, he would bellow out the Tantum Ergo and the Adoremus, with overpowering gusto. Over the weeks and months I found that my ability to tolerate his tones seemed to depend on how distracted I had been in my own prayer during that hour. Then one day, while I was being particularly irked by the out-of-key singing, it hit me that what I heard as imperfect tones were actually sweet euphonies to Our Lord. That Christ heard these offerings from this young mans loving heart and to Him they were entirely lovable. That is when Jesus whispered in my heart that my own meagre offerings were received with the same love. Slowly, he helped peel back the callouses on my heart that prevented me from seeing how lovable this young man is, how very beloved. How gloriously made he is.

It was around this time that I first learnt that the Missionaries of Charity spend an hour in front of the Blessed Sacrament every day, in addition to hours of cumulative prayers throughout the day. The utilitarian grinch in me initially wondered how many more people the Missionaries could care for if they spent just a little less time in prayer. Yet, anyone who has seen the MC's looks of love for the totally unlovable among us will surely intuit that their love for the unlovable is a fruit of many hours in front of Christ Himself, asking for the grace to love the poor just as He does. Without that time in front of the Blessed Sacrament, could they really love the unlovable as they do?

How many times we forget to ask for this grace. How easily we know the theory of 'love thy neighbour' but omit to learn the practice of this from the only One who can teach us. We act as if this is just a discipline we can just persist at and hope that our practice will make perfect. Yet, how can we ever reasonably think that our own efforts can ever come close to the love shown on the Cross, without His grace to get us there?

When we think of the most unlovable person in our lives, whether it be a family member, colleague, perhaps even one's own spouse, how can we possibly lay down our lives for this person, by our own pitiful efforts? How can we possibly do this if we cannot even handle a cold shower without a groan?

C. S. Lewis, in his sermon *The Weight of Glory*, wrote so very beautifully:

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit...

And our charity must be real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner - no mere tolerance or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment.

*Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. (Lewis C.S., *The Weight of Glory, Theology*, Nov 1941).*

Think again of that unlovable person in your life. How far our own relationships fall from Lewis' exquisite description of what it is to love like Christ. A love that sees the glory of God in all those around us. Perhaps we are so far from this that it seems unachievable for us.

And yet, the grace is there for the asking.

Every conflict in our lives, every difficult relationship, can be redeemed if we are able to see the other as our creator sees them. The cataracts on our eyes are hardened, and stubborn, they keep us in the blindness of pettiness and discomfort. Yet Christ wants to help us remove these cataracts, so that we can see that difficult person as the glory that He has created. Next

to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. Imagine if we lived this Holy Week not simply dwelling within the Paschal mysteries, but actively seeing the God-given glory in each person we encounter. Are we asking Him for this grace? Do we desire it? At the very least, are we desiring to desire it? Are we asking the Holy Spirit to come in and remove these callouses on our hearts, so that we can see our fellow immortals how God sees them, and love them with the tender, overflowing mercy with which He loves us?

As we stand at the foot of the Cross this week, and survey the great love which lays down His life for our tone-deaf brokenness, may we ask Him to help us see the unlovable around us with His own eyes, and love them with His own heart. We will never experience a greater love than this.

~ *Jovina James*



The Good Samaritan - Jacob Jordaens