

Sacred Heart Novena *Gardiner Street (1)*

A listening heart.

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General intro

Welcome to these nine days of preparation for the feast of the Sacred Heart. The title of the novena is a question: Is your heart in the right place? In part, this is an echo of something we say about someone who is difficult: but her/his heart is in the right place! This time, we use the expression to explore ourselves as disciples: is my/our heart in the right place? The first talk is called: A listening heart. The last talk is called: a heart in pilgrimage.

To accompany us in these days we have the Gospel of Luke. All the readings are taken from the Acts and the Gospel of Luke. My invitation to you all is to read this Gospel in the course of our nine days together. It has 24 chapters, so 2 or 3 chapters a day – no need to rush it. It is the great Gospel of compassion and so very suitable as we approach the feast of the Sacred Heart.

Particular Intro.

When I was in secondary school, we had a very good book of English poetry. One of the poems was a slightly spooky one which used to make the hairs of the back of my neck stand up – and still can. It was called "The Listeners" by Walter de la Mare. You'll remember it as soon as you hear it:

"Is there anybody there?" said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champed the grass
Of the forest's ferny floor;
And a bird flew up out of the turret,
Above the Traveller's head:
And he smote upon the door again a second time;
"Is there anybody there?" he said.

"Is there anybody there" is a feeling we can have as stand under a clear sky at night. I have in mind not just the natural feeling of wonder but also the feeling of immense awe when we remember what science is saying about universe. The universe, according to the latest science, is 13.77 billion years old. Somehow or other it all started in a single "atom": in the first 10^{-43} seconds of its existence, the universe was very compact, less than a million billion billionth the size of a single atom. Its been expanding ever since. We get to see a tiny corner of it from spaceship earth. Naturally we feel overwhelmed by this, the vastness of it all and smallness of us human beings, for all our self-importance. Naturally, the question bubbles up: Is there any one there? In all of this, is there a God – and we, as human beings, we listen out for the possibility that there might be God – in a word, we stand before the universe as "Hearers of the Word."

Topic

As people of faith, we do believe in God – a God beyond and within all that is. As St Paul puts it in the Acts, God in whom we live and move and have our being. And we do believe this God has spoken.

Arguments

1. Once I was in the airport in Amman in Jordan – a beautifully kept airport. On the walls, they had quotations from different figures, including St Augustine. According to Saint Augustine:

Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead, He set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?

2. As people of faith, we believe God has indeed spoken, not only in creation but also to the people of Israel and then, in Christ, to all of us. Where do we find God's Word today? The great Dominican philosopher Brian Davies once wrote a short catechism – elegant and clear. At one point he asks, where is the Word of God to be found. The answer is memorable: the Word of God is to be found chiefly in the Scriptures. Chiefly is very good: in other words, not only. Nevertheless, chiefly in the Scriptures.

3. When we take up the Scriptures, it is the same God the creator of the cosmos, the same God who spoke to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the same God who spoke through the Word made flesh, who speaks to us now through the words of the readings. If we listen deeply, God will speak to each one of us through the words of Scripture. For that deep listening, we require an ear, a mind and heart. A ear to pay attention. A mind to understand. A heart to listen and receive.

4. Luke opens his story of Jesus' ministry with the scene just read: "these words are fulfilled in your hearing." He closes the story of Jesus with the disciples on the road, when they realised "weren't our hearts burning within us as he opened the Scriptures to us." Our hope is that we too can experience our hearts burning within us, as the scriptures are fulfilled into our hearing today.

Conclusion

Of course, in these days, we miss the presence of Christ in Holy Communion. But the same Christ is equally present in his Word. All that is required is an attentive ear, an open mind and listening heart. My hope is that we will walk together during this novena, in the company of Christ, who opens the Scriptures to us.

We make our own the prayer of Origen,

Lord, inspire me to read your Scriptures and to meditate upon them day and night. I beg you to give me real understanding of what I need, that I in turn may put its precepts into practice. Yet, I know that understanding and good intentions are worthless, unless rooted in your graceful love. So I ask that the words of Scripture may also be not just signs on a page, but channels of grace into my heart. Amen.