

# THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

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# **How Faith Can Grow amid Opposition**

**A reflection taken from a homily by St. Pope John Paul II**

The Gospel we hear today shows us how we can be led to Christ and his light even through opposition. One who was congenitally blind is given sight. But sight is not faith. At first one may not realize who it is who has given one the gift of sight through the power of God. In the case at hand the gift is surrounded by incredulity and opposition—the Pharisees do not want to admit that a miracle has been worked because they deny that Jesus has been sent by God and acts in the Name and power of God. Further, there is fear of what they will do—the fear of excommunication, for example—that leads the parents of the healed man to try and distance themselves from the wondrous gift.

When Christ gives someone sight and that person begins to see things that before were invisible, will everyone admit that the one who has received the light of faith now see things as they really are? In the Gospel we have just heard, we see that faith can overcome all such obstacles and be stronger than the incredulity and mistrust of those who would discredit the gift of new sight. All this speaks with special eloquence to us, to the behavior and attitude of every Christian.

Isn't the faith of each of us exposed to the weakness that we find in ourselves? Is it not exposed to the attacks of the incredulous, the distrustful, the doubting, and even to persecutors? Think of all those throughout the world to whom Christ has given light and how much difficulty, oppression and persecution of their faith they must battle with. And every one of us is weak. We have to pray for a strong faith and a courageous faith!

Faith brings together light and strength of spirit. This all comes from God, as this Sunday's liturgy emphasizes. A believing person accepts the light of Christ and at the same time shares in Christ's threefold mission—as prophet, as priest, and as king and guide. This sharing unites the behavior and life of a person with the salvific mission of the Good Shepherd. Indeed, our mission and our identity are made one with that of Christ. The Good Shepherd is the redeemer of the world and all those who through faith and hope and love belong to his fold participate in the power and mystery of the work of redemption. It is in this light that the person of faith sees everything in a new way and sees truths to which others are blind. No wonder we experience opposition. But in Christ we can overcome every obstacle and every form of opposition. We need only cling to Christ and do it in the personal experience of the truth that our new ability to see reveals.

# **Worshiping God in the Spirit & by the Truth**

A reflection by St. Cyril of Alexandria

When God saw that the human race was being destroyed he sent his only Son to save us from sin and death. Christ offered himself for us and of his own free will submitted even to death and accepted our sin upon himself. This did not mean that he committed our sins but that, as Scripture says, He bore our sins and suffered for our sake and was taken for a criminal. He was innocent but for our sake he became the accused. Like a good shepherd he laid down his life for his sheep.

In obedience to God's command David set up an altar in the place where he had seen the angel of destruction stop. It was there that death was halted and overcome, there that the destroyer ceased to slay, and that is what Christ does. In the Church, the dwelling place of the one who by his very nature is life, death was overcome.

These are truths that we must live by. These truths are taught us by the Church. By way of comparison we call the Church a threshing floor, because there are gathered, like sheaves of wheat, those cut off from the life of this world by the word of the Holy Reaper. They have given up all useless and unnecessary thoughts and deeds—which may be thought of as chaff—and are being collected like grain to be carried up into the courts of Heaven and the Heavenly Jerusalem. This is, as it were, the Lord's granary.

Christ asked his holy apostles: Don't you say: In four months it will be harvest time? But look, I tell you that if you look at the fields you will see that they are already white and ready for harvesting. Already the reaper is receiving his wages and gathering in a harvest for eternal life. On another occasion, Christ said to them: The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. You must beg the Lord of the harvest to send people out to reap it. Now, as I understand matters, the harvest Christ spoke of is a spiritual one. It pertains to the great multitude of those who will come to believe in Him.

The harvesters, however, are those who keep in their minds and on their tongues the words and truths of God. These are living and active, and they cut more keenly than any two-edged sword, piercing to the meeting place of soul and spirit, to the innermost recesses of our being. We are sent to proclaim these words and the truth they reveal and to draw others to the threshing floor—that is, to the Church. It is a threshing floor which Christ purchased at a very high price. Christ gave himself for the Church. In it he set up an altar and, since he was both the priest and the sacrifice, he offered himself, as though he were some beast treading out the grain. He became a holocaust and a peace offering simultaneously. By eating of this offering we are given strength and skill to proclaim the saving truth. We proclaim it first by our lives and then by our words. We show forth the salvation and new life which we offer to others. That is our mission.

# **You Are Sent to Replace Darkness with Light**

**A reflection taken from a homily by Origen of Alexandria**

Once a year the High Priest of Israel entered the holiest part of God's Temple to sprinkle the blood of sacrifice on God's Mercy Seat, as God's throne of judgment was called. What the high priest did symbolically our high priest, Jesus Christ, has done in reality. Let us turn our minds and hearts to Jesus.

He said: God sent me to bring good news to the poor, to announce a year acceptable to the Lord, and to proclaim the Day of Forgiveness. In an ordinary year, the ancient high priests entered once into the Holy of Holies, but Jesus, having fulfilled God's Plan of Salvation, passes through the very Heavens and enters into the very presence of the Heavenly Father to cause God to look with mercy upon the human race and to intercede for each and all of those who have believed in Him.

This is what John the Apostle was speaking of when he said: Little children, what I say to you I say so you will not sin; but if anyone has sinned we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the just one. He is the atonement for our sins". That is what St. Paul also tells us: God appointed Jesus Christ to be the atonement for our sins in his blood and through faith. We Christians have a Day of Atonement unto the end of the world. It is today and everyday.

God taught the People of Israel how to celebrate the rite of atonement and so be reconciled. They need to be reconciled with God and with what they were given through the covenant, which was not always what they wanted. We have come to Christ, the ultimate high priest, and through his blood he has made God look upon us with mercy and has reconciled us to the Heavenly Father. You must not be content with the blood of animal sacrifices but look instead to the Blood of the Word. This is my blood, he says, which will be shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

In Israel's rite of atonement the high priest sprinkled blood on the mercy seat in the direction of the east. This is the direction of sunrise and that symbolizes the Dayspring, the one who comes from on high to save. He is the ultimate mediator between God and the human race. We are invited to keep our gaze fixed on the east, from which direction comes the Sun of Righteousness, the unfailing source of light. Light too is a symbol for truth. The dark night of ignorance of God and God's ways has ended. We have the true light and can walk in it every day. We live, so to speak, in the noontide of faith.

We have not been given this light in order to keep it just for ourselves. We are commanded to be lights to the world. We are to share the light which is the truth we have received, disclosed to us in Jesus Christ who has died for love of us all. We see this clearly. If we, do how can we refuse to walk in this way, the way of Jesus?

# **The Assurance Mercy Gives**

**A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Pope Leo the Great**

The Gospel of John tells us: “All will know that you are my disciples if you show love for one another”. In a Letter of John we read: “Beloved, let us love one another for love is from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God; one who doesn’t love doesn’t know God, for God is love”. We have to enter into ourselves and make a true judgment concerning our attitudes of mind and heart. If we find a store of love’s fruits in our hearts then we need have no doubt about God’s presence within us.

Do you want to increase your capacity to receive so great a guest as God? Then we have to practice greater and greater generosity in doing good. We have to persevere in charity. If God is love then charity should know no limit; God, after all, is in no way limited. Thus any time is the right time for a work of charity. These days of Lent, however, provide special encouragement. Those who want to share in the Lord’s Passover and do so in holiness of mind and body must seek above all to win the grace of doing this. For charity contains all the virtues and covers a multitude of sins.

We are preparing to celebrate the greatest of all mysteries. It is that by which the blood of Jesus Christ did away with our sins. So we must first of all make ready a sacrificial offering of works of mercy. In this way we can give, even to those who have sinned against us, what God, in great goodness has already given to us, who sinned against God.

So we must extend to those in need, to those afflicted in whatever way, a more open handed generosity. We want them to have much for which to thank God, so that God may be thanked through as many voices as possible. This should be the fruit of our fasting. It should turn our attention from ourselves to those who need mercy in any way. No act of devotion gives God greater joy than this. Where God finds charity and loving concern, there God recognizes a reflection of Divine care and love.

In acts of mercy do not be afraid you will run out of means to help others. A generous spirit is itself a great gift and where there is no shortage of this there is always a way. It is Christ who shows mercy, as he did in feeding so many thousands with a few loaves of bread. Christ’s hand is present in every act of giving mercy. He multiplies the bread of mercy as you break and distribute it.

One who shows mercy should be free from anxiety and full of joy. Our gain will be greatest when we keep nothing for ourselves that could be shared with others who are in need. As Paul says, “He who provides seed for the sower will provide bread for the hungry and will provide you with more seed and so with a richer harvest of goodness.” Do not be afraid. In generosity we find assurance of God’s goodness and love, not only for the needy but for ourselves.

# **Let Christ's Truth Burn in Your Hearts**

A reflection by St. Ambrose

In Psalm 119 we are summoned to pray in these words: Let your face shine on your servant and teach me your precepts. The Lord seeks to enlighten those who have been called by Christ so that a holy light may shine in their hearts. This means that when you see wisdom in anyone you can be sure that the glory of God has come down and flooded that person's mind with the light of understanding and knowledge of divine truth. In the case of Moses, God's glory affects his body as well as his spirit, causing his face to shine. He was so transfigured that people were afraid to look at him.

The face of Moses presents the splendor of God's Law. Yet that splendor is not to be found in the written letters but in the spiritual interpretation of that Law. Yet when Moses died and Joshua took his place, assured by God that he would be accompanied by divine power and wisdom as Moses had been, no one was afraid of him because his face didn't shine. But now the Holy Spirit has brought to us a new Moses, Jesus—who is also the new Joshua. And anyone who comes to him, and is granted an unveiled sight of his countenance will see the glory of God, as it was seen on Mt. Tabor.

Through the coming of his Only Son, God, the Almighty Father, has made his light shine into the hearts of all peoples. In Christ, God brings them to see his glory, in the face of Christ Jesus. St. Paul reminds us of this in saying: The God who commanded light to shine out of darkness has made his light shine in our hearts, to enlighten us with the knowledge of God's glory shining in the face of Christ Jesus.

When we repeat the words of the Psalm and ask: Let your face shine upon your servant" we are expressing our longing to see the face of Christ. This we seek so that our minds may receive enlightenment. Jesus said, "Many prophets and righteous people have longed to have this vision". It was not a bodily vision that they, or we, sought. One cannot see the face of the non-bodily God with bodily eyes. Yet it is inherent in our human nature to reach out beyond ourselves and seek God.

What we seek is that God will pour into our hearts that light and knowledge which will cause our hearts to burn with eagerness to share Christ with others. Can you see the face of Christ and not want to share what you have seen? Recall what happened to the disciples who met Christ on the road to Emmaus: Weren't our hearts burning within us while he was opening the Scriptures to us? Christ has opened them for you. Are your hearts aflame? Then imitate those disciples. Get up and hasten to share with others what has been given to you.

# **Lenten Purification Within Ourselves**

**A reflection taken from a text by Carroll Stuhlmueller**

John's Gospel moves in and out of the most profound mysteries of the Godhead. Questions about life and death, judgment and resurrection, sin and grace, heaven and damnation and mystical phenomena rise to the surface in it. Our lives have been graced with tremendous possibilities and feel the touch of an exquisite joy that God offers us. Jesus spoke about all these realities and yet those around him were for ever arguing about things like whether or not he should work a miracle on the Sabbath.

Jesus performed a miracle in healing a man born blind. No jealous people argue whether Jesus violated the Sabbath rest in doing this. Already, in another passage, the prophet Isaiah explained how to keep the Sabbath free of all profanation: "Do what is just, let foreigners join themselves to the Lord". God the Heavenly Father works on the Sabbath by keeping the universe in existence and in good running order. God brings infants to birth and calls others to Him in death. Yet people allow themselves to be blind to the wonderful and tender love of God, and his call for us to imitate this love, and wrangle over points of legal nicety. A tiny mole hill has been turned into a mountain so high it blocks the sight of God.

God has created a beautiful world, of people as well as of natural phenomena. We can become narrow, prejudiced, blinded and miss all that beauty. We can become so absorbed in all sorts of "red tape" as to let the poor die of starvation while we are tangled in it. The handicapped can be deprived of a full life and the excitement of the young is smothered in what is actually irrelevant. We can hide ourselves in darkness, fearful of the wonder of the life God has given us.

To inhabit a world of miracles and healings, of mountains split apart while a world breaks into song, of real contemplations of eternal life and its giver—is to be perpetually challenged and opened. Is it so overwhelming that we can't endure it? Do we want to be distracted by concentrating on every little annoyance rather than God's gift of the world in all its human and natural wonder?

Lent ought to purify and strengthen us so that we can see all of reality and can live magnanimously with the wonderful God who has made us and all else. We can rejoice in gratitude at the marvelous gift of life. "The Lord is faithful in all his works and holy in all his words; the Lord lifts up all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down". That is what Jesus shows us. Let us pray for purification from all that prevents us from rejoicing in his work, especially as revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

# **Mediating the Miracle of Mercy**

From the Encyclical, Rich in Mercy, of St. Pope John Paul II

Mercy, as Christ presents it in his actions and his parables, is an expression of that love which the New Testament calls *agape*. This love reaches out to every one who is born blind and everyone who is a prodigal son, to every sort of human misery. The person who is shown mercy is raised up and restored to full human value and dignity and not looked down upon.

We see this most clearly in parables, especially that of the prodigal son. The joy of the Father is that one of his children has been “found” after being lost. In this joy we see that love was not destroyed and that prodigals do not cease to have a Heavenly Father. It indicates that what is important is that we all come to share in all the wonders of the “Father’s House”. What is present in this parable is not compatible with many of our prejudices about mercy, which looks at things only from the “outside”, claiming to be objective. The parable shows us that the reality of mercy is based on the real experienced dignity of each human person. The Father never forgot the dignity of the prodigal. And his way of treating the repentant son begins to open the son’s eyes to his dignity. He sees what he has done in its full truth and he accepts that truth. This is humility as its heart—living the truth seen in God. And the Father sees clearly what a great good has been realized thanks to the humble acceptance of the truth. He is so overjoyed that all the evil which had been done ceases to matter.

The parable of the prodigal son express in one way what the healing of the man born blind also expresses. The heart of both is the profound inner change to which God calls us all. In both cases this leads to a conversion, a turning, to God. But we can’t see the full inner reality of what is achieved without looking clearly at both the parable and the factual miracle.

In them we see the true and proper meaning of mercy. It doesn’t consist in looking, however penetratingly and compassionately, at moral or physical or material evil. Mercy shows itself when it restores a damaged or lost good, when it promotes and draws good from the forms in which evil clothes itself. Understood in this way, mercy constitutes the fundamental content of the saving message of Christ and is the cornerstone of Christ’s mission. His disciples and followers understood and practiced mercy in the same way. Mercy never ceases to reveal itself in the heart and in the actions as an especially creative form of the pure love that is *agape*. It overcomes evil with good. The face of mercy has to be revealed over and over again. This is more than ever necessary in our times. What better goal to pursue during Lent. Are we not moving toward a lived participation in the love of Christ? To live in this way is to live mercy daily. What Christ has mediated to us we are to mediate to others.