

# THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

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A reflection inspired by a text of Carroll Stuhlmueller
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A reflection inspired by a text of Carroll Stuhlmueller

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# **Fix Your Eyes on Jesus**

**A reflection inspired by a text of Carroll Stuhlmueller**

The Gospel texts for the Fifth Sunday of Lent in all three cycles of readings call us to fix our eyes immovably on Jesus, even if he's doing miraculous things. He is about to do something radically new. Consider that we stand on the threshold of Jesus' Passion, Death and Resurrection. There is nothing new about suffering or death; what is radically new is resurrection. Jesus several times raised people from death, but that meant they would have to die a second time. To rise to a resurrection life is quite different than returning from the dead to ordinary life. Jesus says: Believe that I call you to a resurrection life! That is how far he can go beyond anything he ever did during his lifetime. It is a life so different that we can't imagine what it is going to amount to.

Lent is a forty day long call to repentance. What did you repent of? In other words what did you see in yourself that was getting in the way of opening yourself to the newness Jesus calls us to in calling us to a resurrection life? Consider what we do know about that life. First, it will be a life like Jesus led among us. What gets in the way of our living like Jesus? Second, it will bring us into the very life of the Trinity. Jesus has shown us how a human person can live the life of the Trinity. If you stood before Jesus and saw your entire life pass before you while being compared to that of Jesus would you be shamed and perhaps even afraid? That is pretty much what judgment will involve, according to Scripture.

During this Lent what changes have you allowed Jesus to lead you into, changes that enable you to live more like Jesus? Of course, that doesn't happen unless we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus—not just on Sunday or when reading Scripture or praying. We need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus in the midst of everything we do. It may be that during this Lent you have reflected frequently on the marvelous goodness of God as shown to us in Jesus and his love for us, and for all. The Church intends that the Scriptural emphasis on God's steadfast love should culminate this Sunday. We are called again and again to respond with gratitude—even for the changes to which we are being called. If our life is anything other than a way of loving and of being grateful for being loved then we aren't being transformed. Think of how many people's lives were transformed by the word and example of Jesus! If they could be transformed why can't I? You can—if you will respond gratefully to Jesus' love, and without keeping one eye on what you are afraid you are leaving behind.

Holy Week will be one long reflection on God's compassionate love for us as shown to us in Jesus. That love is to become our entire life. We cannot complain about what we have lost or not received because Jesus did not do as we wanted. We can't say that he has not forgiven us everything while calling us not to commit the same sins again. God did something wholly new in Jesus and he was to do the same in us. Are you willing to be made a "new person"? That's what happens when you keep your eye continually fixed on Jesus and the way he lives. This is the door to resurrection life.

# **Healing for Faintness of Heart**

**A reflection developed from a homily by St. John Chrysostom**

The Epistle to the Hebrews tells us that we stand on the very threshold of victory; we don't need to struggle but only to wait patiently for the Lord. Our "struggle", if that is the correct name for it, is waiting. Think of all the trials and difficulties you have been through and you have not lost your faith in God or in his Son and our Savior, Jesus. Yet you still look forward to the reward promised. If you were a winner in an athletic contest would you let impatience to receive your medal cause you to walk away before the judge came to give it to you? Yet this has been a problem for a long time. St. Paul had to quote Scripture to reassure us: "In a little while the one who is to come will be here".

At the same time St. Paul also quoted another Scripture: "The righteous shall live by faith; no one who shrinks back can please me". We are winners in the contest of faith but we have to show we are winners in heart and mind by waiting in faith for a while longer. We have to take, so to speak, a victory lap in the race to God's presence. We have to begin to act like winners. What does that mean? It means we have to begin to live and act like Jesus in all that we do and say and think.

Jesus foretold the destruction of Jerusalem. It has happened. He foretold that times of great distress would come. They have come. He described how the Gospel and its message would spread throughout the world like a mustard plant growing from a seed almost too tiny to see. It has happened. He also warned us we would face trials but he went on to say: "I have overcome the world". This means that no one can gain mastery over our faith or stop the spread of the Gospel. This too has proven true. In spite of all sorts of persecution he told us that the "Gates of Death", the powers that bring death, would never gain the mastery. Experience bears witness to the fulfillment of all these prophetic words.

Are you troubled or downcast and tempted to lose heart at the sight of wickedness and evil flourishing? Do you want to despair because you see a wicked person having success while you don't? Do you long to see vengeance for all the evil things people do to one another, and perhaps to the Church? You see you have been promised a reward for not doing any of these things but it has not yet come. Then we have to repeat the words St. Paul spoke long ago: "In a little while the one who is to come will be here". Your faith has triumphed over so much. Can you abide in that faith a little longer?

Jesus lived faith in the Heavenly Father and in the love that has not only been shown but promised. By his grace and gift we have shown ourselves winners in the contest of faith. But we have to take our victory lap! We have to settle down into the way of life that Jesus lived, right up to his death on the cross for you and me. He never ceased to do good and to bring people words of healing and consolation and salvation. We are the Body of Christ. Our task is to continue to do good just as he did, and to do it right up to our own death with Him on our own cross.

# **Christ Heals Us of Spiritual Leprosy**

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

St. Paul tells us that everything which happened to the ancient Israelites can be seen symbolically and so teach us. For instance, we hear that Aaron and Miriam, the brother and sister of Moses, once spoke against him in a way that threatened his leadership of the people. But God had chosen him to lead the People to the fulfillment of the promised made to the ancestors. God rebuked both Aaron and Miriam and inflicted on Miriam the punishment of leprosy.

What we have here is an important lesson about speaking ill of our “neighbor”. To do that is to act against the command of God and Jesus command to love others as he does. One who speaks that way may be said to be speaking “against Moses”; i.e., against the teacher of us all in the ways of righteousness. When a person does this evil thing that person becomes what we may call a “spiritual leper”. Their hearts become unclean, as though infected with leprosy, and they distance themselves from the community of God’s chosen ones.

Those who “speak against Moses” in this sense may be heretics, but more commonly they are slanderers or people who bad mouth others. To speak ill of one’s neighbor is to do this and there is no doubt that anyone who does this kind of thing has a leprous heart. Unless one changes one’s ways, this leprosy will keep one unclean right up to the Day of Judgment. So the Lord has given us a time for repentance and for turning to the way of speaking and acting toward our neighbors which we see in Jesus. Have we asked Jesus to help us put aside every way of relating to others that runs contrary to his example?

Aaron and Miriam spoke against Moses out of envy. The Lord told them they were excluded from his presence because of this. In the Book of Numbers we see what punishment envious tongues brought upon these people, in violent contrast to the honor Moses received because he was faithful to God’s teaching. He interceded for those who had spoken ill of him and without any good reason. St. Paul explains what this means for us as follows: “We know that our ancestors were guided by the cloud and were baptized in the cloud and the sea, and that they all ate and drank the same spiritual food and drink from the spiritual rock that followed them, which was Christ”.

God now speaks to us face-to-face, as he did to Moses. God does this in Jesus. In Christ the full reality of our rebirth and our eating of a heavenly food is revealed in our call to follow Jesus and imitate him. Jesus, the Word of God, is the true spiritual food for us and his blood shed on the Cross is our true spiritual drink. But his flesh and his blood, which we eat and drink, are Christ himself. Our spiritual health, and salvation, depends on our becoming Christ. We can only know we are Christ when we act as Christ did. If we are to be cleansed of every form of spiritual leprosy we must come to Jesus. We will experience his healing touch as we experience love for others like Christ’s love for us. Walking this way of mutual love cleanses us and prepares us to stand in the presence of our God on That Day. We are being healed every day we do this.

# **The Freedom Christ Gives Us**

**A reflection developed from a homily by St. Augustine of Hippo**

The Lord taught us about the love we are to have for each other when he said: “There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”. This lesson makes sense when we recall another of his teachings: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” In the first Letter of John this is put together for us. “We ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters in the same way as Christ laid down his life for us”. Following Christ means all this. How can we dare to do this? Scripture points the way to an answer.

In the Book of Proverbs we are told: “When you sit down to eat at the table of a ruler consider carefully what is set before you then stretch out your hand and take your portion, knowing that you in your turn will have to provide the same kind of meal.” We sit at such a table every time we come to God’s altar to receive the body and blood of Christ. We become one with Christ. But if we are one with him then we should know that we too will have to lay down our lives for one another just as he did. Notice the words carefully. We will have to lay down our lives for “one another”. It is not just for God that we will have to do this but for one another.

We have an example of this in the martyrs. They ate at the Lord’s Table and they provided the same kind of meal that the Lord had given them. In fact, at our altar we frequently commemorate martyrs, and we commemorate others, who did not die as martyrs but now rest in peace with the Lord. These are important facts. What the martyrs teach by giving their lives is also taught by faithful Christians who lived lives of faith but were not given the gift of obvious martyrdom. The Lord, the Lord’s martyrs and the Lord’s faithful saints, what do they all teach us?

When you think of dying a martyr what is your reaction within? Perhaps you are filled with a kind of joy and longing simply by imagining the gift of your entire self to God. But if this is the case, does this mental picture reveal the gift you are giving to others as well as the gift to God? Recall the scene from Luke’s Gospel of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as he prepared to die the death of a martyr—for God and for all of us. What he faced were all sorts of fears, just as you probably do when you imagine being a martyr. How did he respond? “Father, if this cup of fear and of all that I fear cannot pass me by, let your will be done and not mine”. Death was not the great obstacle to doing the Father’s will by trusting completely in God. Fear was the great obstacle. In doing the Father’s will he gave us the gift of freedom from fear—if we will accept it.

We aren’t freed from being afraid but from letting fears determine how we act. Each of the martyrs had to accept that grace. Each saint who dies in ordinary ways has to accept it too—not only at the point of death but day by day—when they lived the love of Jesus in spite of rejection, persecution, social ostracism, and all the other ways in which people can hurt us by despising or avoiding us. Giving this example is giving the gift Jesus gave us. We walk through our fears into the arms of our God. This is grace we are offered at our altar.

# **The Gift of Humility and its Price**

**A reflection taken from a text of the Daughters of St. Paul**

***“If I glorify myself my glory is worth nothing; it is my Heavenly Father who glorifies me”.*** This is Jesus’ response to the challenge: Who do you make yourself out to be? Those who questioned him thought he was putting on airs, literally getting above himself. They think he should be more humble rather than making wild claims about who he is.

**What is humility, actually? It isn’t an absence, not bragging about yourself or your accomplishments and gifts, for instance. Humility is rather truth, as spiritual writers have long told us. So if you are talented at something can you go around saying it as much as you like—so long as it’s the truth? No, that’s not what humility is either. It involves a deeper truth. That truth is that talents are a gift. They don’t come from self, even if one has worked very hard to develop them. The deepest truth is that we have absolutely nothing that is simply our own. Every ability and capacity we have comes from God. Bodily graces are from God. Good looks, or their absence, are from God. Good deeds and good luck are all from God. Our very existence is a gift—our Heavenly Father has loved us into existence.**

**Actually, it is the Heavenly Father who glorifies us, and casts us down. Every glory we have, including our humility and ability to accept and broadcast the truth, is from God. What is your greatest glory? It is that Jesus Christ loves you and gave himself for you! If you want to go around proclaiming these truths all day, that is in accord with humility. Humility consists in living the whole truth, and even proclaiming it whenever that is relevant.**

**What is the “true” reason for your great worth? It is not your competency or your accomplishments or your attractiveness, and much less the things you own or have or the responsibilities you have been given. You are of infinite value, much more precious than gold, because of the value placed on you by your Creator and your Redeemer.**

**Jesus, I wish I could get this matter straight, once and for all. I seem to vacillate, bouncing back and forth between being proud, or ashamed, of myself for the wrong reasons and then for the right ones. It isn’t my accomplishments or other people’s good opinions of me that are important. Nor are my failures or other people’s bad opinions of me good reasons for being down on myself. Help me to see and to live in the truth of your eternal and absolute love for me. Help me to live in gratitude for all that you have given me. Help me to use your gifts, as you teach me to do, in imitation of Jesus and so in love for others and for you. Let me glory only in your love for me. Teach me this humility, so that I may live in your truth each day and hour of my life.**

# **God Leads Us to a New Life**

**A reflection inspired by a homily of St. Cyril of Alexandria**

We are told that when God led Israel out of Egypt and toward the Promised Land he was present with them through the Tabernacle erected by Moses. God's presence was made visible during the day by a cloud and during the night by fire in the cloud. When the column of cloud and fire moved then the People of Israel moved. When the column stopped the People stopped. That is, when the cloud moved forward the Tabernacle went with it and when it settled the Tabernacle came to rest.

This is a symbol of how believers follow Christ, the perfect Tabernacle of God among God's People. Christ leads the Church, and so its members. Wherever Christ goes we are called to follow and whenever he stays put we are called to remain there with Him. If you genuinely believe you never let yourself be separated from the Savior and the Church. Christ calls you to be with him always. That means our life as believers is one of constant halts and new departures. Often enough we fail to understand the meaning of a halt or a departure but we know they are necessary for our spiritual journey toward the homeland that is God's Kingdom. But we know that the entire journey, however many its halts or departures, is the result of our desire to be with God in Christ and never to be separated from him.

It is easy enough to see that our first departure was from unbelief and that by it we were led to faith. It is also clear that we are continually led from various forms of ignorance and given enlightenment and knowledge. We have to pass from a state in which we had no perception of God or God's ways to one in which we gradually became able to perceive God in all the realities and events that we encounter. This is part of a larger departure—that from sin—and a being led to a new life. We give up our desires for particular things or satisfactions and learn to long only for God and living in the way Jesus shows us. This, we believe, is the heart of a movement that will bring us from who we now are to the perfect persons God will make us in the Kingdom.

Little by little we advance toward an ideal but often find the need to move unwelcome. We want to keep what we have. But we are called to set out toward we know not what. That is the experience of the fasting and penance and prayer of Lent. St. Paul had this in mind in saying: "*Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the goal, the heavenly reward to which God calls me in Jesus Christ.*" This is the point of our Lenten practices. If we do them faithfully we will begin to know ourselves in new ways; we will begin to see the things we need to leave behind so as to remain close to our Lord. What did you discover this year? Have you been praying for the strength and determination to move on and become more like Jesus Christ? Drawing close to him means becoming like him. Unless we leave many things behind we will not come to the Heavenly reward. Let us help one another both see what needs to be left behind and what God is calling us to do and become. The Lord is our strength and our light. Do not let yourself be conquered by fear.

# **The Self-Giving of St. Joseph**

A reflection inspired by a text of Carroll Stuhlmueller

The marriage of Joseph and Mary was planned in an ordinary way and then commanded by God. They were called to form Jesus, a human being who was the Second Person of the Trinity; he was born and grew up and acquired the character and personality that shaped his way of carrying out God's mission in their family. Scripture says Jesus grew up and matured, as we all do, studied the Scripture more than most and that—in Scriptural language—he grew in grace and favor in God's eyes and those who got to know him. Jesus was different—no one else was ever both human and divine. The marriage of Joseph and Mary was different too—what most notice is that they were celibate.

The differences didn't make the marriage unloving or joyless. God didn't have his Son put on humanity in a joyless family dominated by parental frustrations. Jesus himself was different, but is a model for us all, and Jesus' family was different, but likewise is a model for all families. Jesus' earthly father was a kind and loving one and taught these traits to his adopted son.

This marriage, as presented in today's feast, combines normal existence and supernatural expectations. The combination, if we stop to reflect, is found in every human life and marriage. Jesus' parents each received a personal call from God to marry and love one another and to raise God's Son as fully mature and loving, able to love God with all his human heart and mind and strength. This is our call too. We are called to share God's life and help others share it.

One of the twentieth century's greatest theologians presents the Mystery of the Incarnation as involving the human Jesus having the same identity-forming call as the Second Person of the Trinity: Jesus' human identity consisted in his relation to the Heavenly Father as Son. The relationship's expectation was that Jesus would give himself totally to his Heavenly Father. The Great Commandment makes it clear that everyone's identity is found in this relationship to God. Each of us experiences the same expectation in the same relationship.

Accepting this, letting this relationship be the heart of our personal identity, will lead us to full and joyful humanness and human relations. This expectation is the key to happiness and human fulfillment. No wonder Joseph and Mary's marriage is a model for every marriage. Becoming fully oneself is impossible without becoming fully human in one's inner self and in one's relations to others, especially to those who especially love us and are loved by us.

God's call to Joseph seemed, at first, to frustrate his hopes and expectations regarding his marriage. He had to let go of his plans to accept God's call. He had to trust God with his life in a very deep and complete way. He had to let God give him new hopes and responsibilities and trust that doing this God would lead to life in, to use Scriptural terms, all its abundance (fullness). No doubt following this path led to many sufferings and difficulties. He too had crosses to bear, as do we all. Like his adopted son, our Savior, he accepted the Cross God gave and found in it the path to all he could have hoped for. That shows us what we can expect as well, if we—day by day—say “Yes” to God's call & expectations.

