

A TIME FOR LOVE AND MERCY

A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

The responsorial psalm for the First Sunday of Lent sets the tone for the entire season. “Have mercy on me O God, in your love; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.” God’s covenant with us is a relation of love and mercy, of compassionately loving mercy!

The entire psalm is the prayer of one who, like us, has sinned. Like Adam and Eve we have called things good which were bad, or evil, and have called evil good. God like a loving parent has taught us that we cannot make things good just by calling them good. How can God know what is true for me, we ask? My case is special and I can’t be dealt with just by following general rules! That is often our excuse. But do we have any resources God doesn’t. Eve was told that if she decided for herself what was good rather than trusting in God she would become wise. After all God knows what’s good and bad by doing both—or so the serpent claimed. In telling us not to try to “know” good from evil in the same way God was warning us that this was not the way to wisdom. The first great lie was about God and how God decides what is good and bad.

Have you noticed that Jesus faced the same temptation as we all do? He had to decide that accepting torture and crucifixion was good, and precisely for him. Judas thought he knew better than Jesus what would realize the good that he imagined was the Messianic Kingdom of God. It only brought him death. All the disciples faced the same temptation, as we see in Peter’s case. They couldn’t recognize who Jesus was because they insisted that what God had promised Israel wasn’t what Jesus was offering them. And the same thing was true after his resurrection; they couldn’t recognize who he was because they hadn’t expected anything like what he showed them when he came to them as their Risen Lord.

Do we recognize the Lord Jesus when he comes to us? Lent is about letting go of all that prevents us from recognizing his love and mercy in what happens to us and our world. Can our Heavenly Father really be accomplishing the good of all human beings through what actually happens? It seems like we have to face, over and over again, the crucifixion of our ideas and hopes of what will bring us all to good, and to an everlastingly good life. We talk about “salvation history” as a process of educating and forming us to be like Christ, and we claim that being like Christ is salvation. But do we want to take up our Cross and follow Christ, even to Calvary? Is that our idea of love and mercy? Will we accept our God’s word that it is filled with mercy and love?

A reading from the sermons of St Bernard on the Song of Songs

I admit that the Word has come to me. But although he has come to me, I have never been conscious of the moment of his coming. I perceived his presence, I remembered afterwards that he had been with me. And where he comes from when he visits my soul, and where he goes, and by what means he enters and goes out, I admit that I do not know even now; as John says: 'You do not know where he comes from or where he goes.'

There is nothing strange in this, for of him was it said, 'Your footsteps will not be known.' Perhaps he did not enter because he does not come from outside? He is not one of the things which exist outside us. Yet he does not come from within me, for he is good, and I know that there is no good in me. I have ascended to the highest in me, and look, the word is towering above that. In my curiosity I have descended to explore my lowest depths, yet I found him even deeper. If I looked outside myself, I saw him stretching beyond the furthest I could see; and if I looked within, he was yet further within.

You ask then how I knew he was present, when his ways can in no way be traced. He is life and power, and as soon as he enters in, he awakens my slumbering soul; he stirs and soothes and pierces my heart, for before it was hard as stone, and diseased. So he has begun to pluck out and destroy, to build up and to plant, to water dry places and illuminate dark ones; to open what was closed and to warm that which was cold; to make the crooked straight and the rough places smooth, so that my soul may bless the Lord, and all that is within me may praise his holy name.

So when the Bridegroom, the Word, came to me, he never made known his coming by any signs, only by the movement of my heart, as I have told you did I perceive his presence; and I knew the power of his might because my faults were put to flight and my human yearnings brought into subjection. I have marveled at the depth of his wisdom when my secret faults have been revealed and made visible; at the very slightest amendment of my way of life I have experienced his goodness and mercy; in the renewal and remaking of the spirit of my mind, that is of my inmost being, I have perceived the excellence of his glorious beauty, and when I contemplate all these things I am filled with awe and wonder at his manifold greatness.

A reading from the homilies of Pope Francis

We can ask ourselves today: What kind of heart do we have? Is it a fickle heart which like a dancer, like a butterfly flits from one to another...always in motion; Is it a heart that is scared by the vicissitudes of life, and is hiding and afraid to give witness to Jesus Christ; is it a brave heart or a heart that has so much fear and is always trying to hide? What does our heart care for? What treasure does our heart hold? Is my heart fixed upon creatures, or the problems that we all have? Is my heart fixed upon everyday gods?

We all have within us some areas, some parts of our heart that are not alive, that are a little dead; and some of us have many dead places in our hearts, a true spiritual necrosis! And when we are in this situation, we know it, we want to get out but we can't. Only the power of Jesus, the power of Jesus can help us come out of these atrophied zones of the heart, which we all have. We are all sinners!

Today I invite you to think for a moment, in silence, here: where is my interior necrosis? Where is the dead part of my soul? Where is my tomb? Think, for a short moment, all of you in silence. Let us think: what part of the heart can be corrupted because of my attachment to sin, one sin or another? Take away the stone of shame and allow the Lord to say to us, as he said to Lazarus: "Come out!" Let us hear that voice of Jesus who, by the power of God, says to us: "Come out! Leave that tomb you have within you. Come out. I give you life, I give you happiness, I bless you, I want you for myself.

Always remember this: life is a journey. It is a path, a journey to meet Jesus. At the end, and forever. A journey in which we do not encounter Jesus is not a Christian journey. It is for the Christian to continually encounter Jesus, to watch him, to let ourselves be watched over by Jesus, because Jesus watches us with love; he loves us so much, he loves us so much and he is always watching over us. To encounter Jesus also means allowing oneself to be gazed upon by him.

When we allow ourselves to be encountered by him, he enters into us and renews us from within. This is what it means for Christ to come: to renew all things, to renew hearts, souls, lives, hope and the journey. I ask for the grace that our heart may be simple and bright with the truth He gives us, and this way we can be kind, forgiving, understanding with others, big-hearted with people and merciful.

Let us always remember: The Church's strength does not reside in herself and in her organizational abilities, but it resides hidden in the deep waters of God. And these waters stir up our aspirations and desires - expanding the heart. It is as St Augustine says: "Pray to desire and aspire to expand the heart."

A reading from the writings of Pierre Charles

Lord, you gave me two simple hands when I was born, which I usually take for granted. Help me now to understand the value which you have given them. There are motherly hands which carry little children, helpful hands which nurse wounds and care for the sick, hardworking hands which sow and plough, plant and build, write pages or lay cables, consecrated hands which bless and forgive, and there are the outstretched hands of beggars. There are the hands which wave farewell, and the hands joined in a gesture of gratitude, and those of artists who shape beauty. Lord, these are the hands of men and women who have built everything, and alas, destroyed much of earth. Our minds have found these two good workers placed at our disposal by your Providence, ready to learn everything and to make everything. We rely upon them to accomplish all perfect work. Even the food I take, the place of my abode and the grave which will receive me are all due to the work of the hands of my neighbor. There is a kind of an immense sacrament in this gift of hands which comes from you. Their sight alone should fill me with gratitude especially when I am able, through them, to dispense gestures of mercy, comfort and service to my fellow travelers.

Lord, in memory of your hands, pierced with nails, keep mine worthy of yours. Inspire me with the love of generous giving and serving. May my hands not be wide open when time comes to receive and tightly closed when they should give! May nothing cling to these hands, dispensers of your beauty! Let me work simply for others like you, whose hands cured lavishly and whose only reward were those two nails through your palms.

All around me I find the work of kindly hands. And above all creation I see the hands of the Word made flesh, the hands which alone can open the Kingdom of Heaven, and from which the graces of forgiveness and light everlastingly flow. And those hands are those rough, competent, work-hardened hands, ones of a village carpenter. Once upon a time St Peter, sinking in the waves of the sea, clutched those hands. I should do the same and trust in them as one trusts the hands of a surgeon, as one holds out one's hands in a pledge of loyalty, and as one joins them together in the hour of prayer and supplication. Lord, I am prepared to die empty handed provided my hands are empty because I have refused to keep anything and have never been weary of giving and serving, and not because they have remained idle, and tightly closed when they should have given.

A reading from the writings of Hubert van Zeller

We need to get a clear idea of loneliness. There is a loneliness which leads to God, and there is the loneliness which is dramatized, used to attract attention, made the subject of sentimental songs. We are given the choice. Rightly orientated, loneliness can be pressed into the service of prayer.

It is all right to be lonely provided you can control it. If you cannot control it you sink so deep into self that you cannot rise above it to God. It can be the best of opportunities. It can make for recollection, compassion for the loneliness of others, a deeper understanding of the mental and spiritual isolation suffered by Jesus. But it can also go the other way, leading to self-pity, suspicion, alienation, hopelessness and even despair.

Loneliness is a quiet suffering: fear is a more violent one. Because fear is more obtrusive it is less easy to steer towards love. Loneliness is not only potential material for love but is often love's test. It can even be love's final expression.

If the culmination of loneliness is to be found in Christ's last hour on the Cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" the minor loneliness of human experience has at least the support of precedent and direction.

Neither travel, change, nor congenial company can do much to ease the ache of loneliness. Loneliness is looking for something which this life cannot provide. Basically it is homesickness for heaven. So I must train myself in faith to move about in eternity.

There are times when someone we know and love suddenly turns to stone and does not understand, or does not want to understand, a word we say. There is nothing we can do. I know no greater loneliness than this.

I know the theory of loneliness leading me to find companionship in Jesus, but I know also, that unless he comes himself to reinforce the theory I shall grasp compensations. Even while doing so I know that to stretch out to anything less than him is only to make me more hollow more shallow.

When I try to lessen the loneliness of another I find I am lessening my own. If everyone were to make the same attempt the incidence of loneliness in the world would decrease. This is not a pious notion, it is a mathematical certainty.

The more we come to rely upon material support outside ourselves the fewer reserves of our own we have left. We cry out and all we get back is the echo of our loneliness.

Often I imagine I am making a present of this or that to God. I give God my work, health, talents, ambitions, frustrations and so on. The offering of my loneliness is probably more pleasing to God than any other. It is offering to God his Son's loneliness.

A reading from the writings of Pierre Charles

Our life can be a resolute and all-embracing Amen. Perfection is not found in being rare, but in being authentic, and to be authentic we must not cling tenaciously to our own ideas, but rather suit ourselves to the will of God, and work only in union with the Master. An unbroken Amen, which like the weaver's thread turns back ten thousand times upon itself, crossing and re-crossing in the loom, always pliant and always firm, becomes in time a marvelous tissue of the seamless garment. There is not a knot in the whole, no resistance, no stiffness, but also no inconsistent weaknesses, no unexpected fantasies. Nothing can be woven with grains of sand, ropes are not made with water.

How would it be if we would try to enclose our life in an "Amen"? We have uttered it so often, and it will be the final word the Church prays as its farewell to us after the words, "Rest in peace." This word, which puts the last touch on all creatures as they are committed into the divine hands, might well serve as a distinctive seal for me. The Amen uttered from the heart does away with all grumblings and exactions, and fills the soul with luminous peace. People have been known, at some given moment of their lives, to take, as it were, a large blank sheet of writing paper, and at the bottom of the page, in the guise of a signature, write the one word, "Amen". And after that they have handed over their lives to God and His providence.

Amen then, beforehand to all the arrangements of God. Amen to the unexpected and sudden events which will occur. Amen to the long-drawn-out-tribbles, to the disappointments of each day. Amen to all the joys and sorrows. This little word will remove much sinful folly from our paths; it will hold us back from leaping into ditches and from losing ourselves in the pursuit of foolish dreams. Amen is peremptory like a conclusion or like a treaty that has been signed, a trial that has been ended. Amen is short as truth, which is but itself, and to which never-the-less there is no end to the telling. Amen is honest, clear and high spirited and the powers of darkness within are afraid of its determined demeanor and of the light which it turns on into the darkest corners. If only we could argue with Amen! Adepts as we are in all the arts of quibbling and contriving, we could easily find some compromise, and our clever reasoning would supply us with convenient solutions. But with Amen all resistance melts away and we cease to belong to ourselves. I shall say it then, this modest Amen, which is as humble and as eternal as the Son of God. May our whole life be as it were, the complete, yet simple answer to the grace which came to meet us before we even knew that we existed, and which can destroy all deaths within us! May 'Amen' be eternally written in our hearts and lived in our lives.

FACING TEMPTATION

A reflection from a homily by St. Gregory Nazianzen

Did you expect baptism to free you from temptation? Did you think it would ward off the persecution of the Evil One? The body that Jesus bore didn't hide him from the enemy but make him a target. His assumption of a visible form makes allow even the Invisible Light that he is as God to be an object of attack. Yet we have at hand the means of overcoming the Enemy and all temptation, we should not let ourselves fear the struggle we face. Flaunt in the Devil's face the water which is the Spirit and you will see all the flaming arrows of the Evil One put out.

Suppose the tempter makes us feel the pinch of poverty. Didn't Christ feel this? Taking advantage of our hunger the Enemy talks of turning stones into loaves of bread. Do not be taken in by such talk. What you must do is show the tempter what he has still not grasped. That is show him the Word of Life that is the Bread sent down from Heaven. This is Christ's word and it gives life to the world, both as bread and as word.

Perhaps the Enemy will try to ensnare us through our vanities. This is what he tried to do to Christ by placing him on the pinnacle of the Temple and telling him to throw himself down, and so prove his divinity. He tried to make this seem good and useful but its end would have been evil, and perhaps trivial. Let us beware of succumbing to pride. After all, the Tempter will not stop with one success but always pursues us and beguiles us. It is simply the Devil's way of waging war.

We know how well-versed the Devil is in Scripture. When Christ answered the temptation to turn stones into bread and used Scripture to do it, the Devil used Scripture to council evil. "It is written, He will give his angels charge of you and on their hands they will bear you up." Isn't he a past master of all evil and deceit? Why suppress the verse that follows? It says that we shall tread on the Devil as one does on a snake or a scorpion. We will treat the Devil like an adder or cobra.

If the Tempter tries to overcome us through greed, showing us something like all the Kingdoms of the world, as if anything belonged to him instead of God, and demanding we fall down and worship him to get what we want, we should despise him. We know the Evil One is an imposter and has nothing. Strong in our baptism each of us can say: "I am made in the image of God! And unlike you I have not become an outcast from heaven through pride! I have become one with Christ; I have put on Christ by my baptism." It is the Devil who should fall prostrate before us. Faced with such truth the Devil can only depart as he did from the Light of the World, in whose light we live.