

THE FOURTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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WHAT HAS CHRIST BROUGHT YOU?

A reflection by John Henry Cardinal Newman

At the time appointed, Christ came forth from the Heavenly Father and showed himself to all our world. First, he showed forth God as creator and then as teacher, and revealer, and mediator. Neither cloud nor image, emblem or word, was interposed between the Son and the Eternal Father. Listen to his own words: *“No one knows the Son by the Father, neither does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.”* Again, Jesus says, *“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”*. And he tells us that is due to the fact that he and the Father are one and that he is always in the bosom of the Father and so can disclose him.

As a result of such words, the Apostle John draws a contrast between Moses and Christ, to our comfort. *“The Law”*, he says, *“was given by Moses but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ”*. In Jesus, God is fully and truly seen, so that Jesus is the Way in an absolute sense as well as the truth and the life. All our duties are summed up for us in the message Jesus brings. Those who *look* towards him for teaching, who worship and obey him will, by degrees, see *“the light of the knowledge and the glory of God in his face”*, and they will be *“changed into the same image from glory to glory”*.

And so it happens that every sort of person, of whatever background, may know fully the ways and works of God—at least as fully as a human being can. We know far better and more truly than the wisest of this world. Faith has a store of wonderful secrets which no one can communicate to another, and which are most pleasant and delightful to know. *“Call on me”*, says God by the prophet, *“and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things of which you have had no knowledge.”* This is no mere idle boast; it is a fact that all who seek God will find to be true, though perhaps they can't clearly express the meaning.

The strange truths are first about ourselves. Many want to know about God, or about their duties or about the world or heaven or hell. People want new ways of viewing things, discoveries about things that can't be expressed in words, marvelous prospects and through half-understood, deep convictions inspiring joy and peace. Yes, these are a part of the revelation which Christ, as Son of God, brings to those who obey him. Moses too had much to gain from the Great God, some scattered rays of the truth, and that for his personal comfort and not for all Israel. But Christ has brought from the Heavenly Father wonders for all a full and perfect way of life. But first he brings us knowledge of ourselves, often as not as unwelcome as other sorts of knowledge are welcome. But this is grace as well as truth. It is a most surprising and renewing miracle of mercy. Do we perhaps need a reminder of this when we have been shown some dark corner of our being that we would rather not know about? Do not be afraid. Through all this sort of knowledge we find our Lord and joy!

REJOICING IN THE CLOSENESS OF THE LORD

A refection by Meister Eckhart, OP

Our Lord says, *“Know that the Kingdom of God is close to you!”* Indeed, the Kingdom of God is within us! God is closer to me, and closer to you, than we are to ourselves. My continued existence depends on God’s being near me and present to me. In fact, God is also in a stone or a log, but they don’t know it. If the wood knew God and realized how close God is to it, as the highest angel does, the log would be as blessed as that angel. We humans are more blessed than stones or pieces of wood because we are aware of God and know how close God is to us.

I am the more blessed the more aware I am of this, and I am less blessed the less I keep this in mind. I am not blessed because God is in me and is near me and because I possess God, but because I am aware of how close God is to me and thus aware that I know God. The prophet says in the psalter, *“Do not be without understanding like a mule or a horse”*. And the Patriarch Jacob says, *“God is in this place, and I didn’t know it”*. Now you see why we should strive to know God by being aware that God’s Kingdom is near and at hand.

In whatever person God’s Kingdom has dawned, because that person knows that God’s Kingdom is near when God is near, has no need of sermons or teaching. Such a person is instructed by the knowledge of God’s nearness and assured of eternal life. Such a person can repeat Jacob’s words and add, *“but now I know God is in this place”*. To be saved and have eternal life is to be fully present to God and that presence is the fullness of God’s Kingdom.

If one is to know God one must forget self and lose self. If one is aware of self then one is not focused on awareness of God. Such a person needs to find self again but in God. By the act of being deliberately aware of God one knows self and all things in God. All one has given up is restored. If, for instance, I am truly to know goodness I must know it where goodness is in itself, not where it is divided up. If I am truly to know being or any such reality, I must know it where it subsists in itself and is undivided. That is in God.

No one should think it is hard to come to such awareness. Even though it sounds difficult and like a great matter that is not the case. It may be true that it is a little difficult in the beginning, as one becomes detached. But when one has gotten into this, no life is easier or more delightful or lovelier. God is at great pains to be always with one and to lead one inward. May we be ready to follow!

No human being ever wanted anything so much as God wants to bring each of us to knowledge of Himself. God is always ready, but we are unready. God is near to us, but we are far from God. God is in us, but we are “out”. God is at home in us but we are abroad. David says, *“God leads the just through narrow paths to the highway, that they may come out into the open.”* May all of us follow God’s lead and let God bring us to a place where we shall truly know God, and know God fully.

LIVING OUR LIVES AS GIFTS OF GOD

A reflection by Phillip Britts

We are human and finite and so can't seem to live perpetually in love of the Lord. We are distracted by many things. Our spiritual awareness waxes and wanes in intensity. What if we try harder? The swing of emotions is natural and some are more subject to extremes than others, but we should beware of the delusion that cultivating religious emotions is always a work of the Holy Spirit. Such emotions risk getting in the way of our communion with God.

It is here that we need to see the necessity of Christ's coming to earth. We cannot bring ourselves to God and so God has come to us. What is genuine in our looking toward God is the work of the Holy Spirit, and this is never our work. Spiritual depth is a matter of God penetrating us and no ladder of mysticism will take us to God. Faith is never an ability or strength to do something, it is a call to surrender our whole life. To put it simply, spiritual experience is not something we can manufacture. We can only receive it. Indeed, spiritual experience leads to activity, but it is the activity of surrender and of obedience. This is how Christ was conceived, and brought to birth, and lived and died.

This pattern of surrender to God's will is vitally important for all of us. It begins with the gift of God's love. When we experience this love we turn away from the notion that we initiate and God responds. Our will cannot save us. Our surrender is the path to unity and charity and clarity of understanding. This releases us from servitude to our own desires so we can become free—to serve and love God. We don't come to know God by thinking or doing contemplation. God comes to us when we offer a cup of water to the thirsty. Human love can't redeem, though, and we also need to remember this as we love with Christ. Because the Word became flesh, the same amazing life that is Jesus Christ can be realized in us. This is the only reality that revolutionizes lives and can transform the world. Jesus asked once, "*Why do you call me 'good'? There is only one who is good, God!*" No merely human love is immune from evil. As St. John says, "*Herein is love; not that we loved God but that God loved us!*"

Christ's purpose was never to bring about self-improvement. Christ's didn't become poor to show us how to tone ourselves up morally. We are not in charge of the kind of person we become by surrendering our lives to Christ. Jesus' life is an example of how the will of God is worked out upon this earth. When he came close to the cross he too had to surrender everything. He had to leave it to God to make what God would choose out of his ministry and words and healings and the training of his disciples. You don't have to visualize what God would have your life mean and then work toward it. You simply have to obey what God's providence brings to you. What happens will probably surprise you! But if you are surrendered to God you know that what happens will be good and beautiful. Surrender is the path to joy in the Lord.

LEADING OTHERS TO CHRIST IN FREEDOM

A reflection by Henri Gheon

People think that a work founded on authority has a better chance for survival since authority can be passed on. They think a work founded on liberty is likely to descend into chaos. Yet Don Bosco's work was founded on liberty. He appreciated the minds of children and refused to try to constrain them. There must be a minimum of discipline but individual liberty is observed and not really controlled. Don Bosco approached each boy with an interest in all that was his—family, jobs, tastes—in so far as possible as one of the boy's peers would do this. In this way he won confidence and liking and used them, seemingly without effort, to teach a knowledge of good and evil, a desire for the best and a taste for prayer. Above all, prayer must not be reserved for certain times and places because God is always present. For evening prayer, he brought the boys out of church for this precise reason. What Don Bosco said was short, familiar, illustrated and within the grasp of all. The boys gathered in a yard for evening prayer and it lasted two or three minutes. It was designed as part of their play.

Since the master had taken such an interest in whatever games the boys chose to play it was natural for them to take an interest in his sermonettes. He would make some incident in their day the occasion of a reflection and was listened to with pleasure. His idea was to place a child's life on what he called the "level of joy" and make this a path to love of God. They never went to sacraments en mass because Don Bosco saw his job as winning individuals to want them.

If a boy behaved badly then he was punished but only when it was really necessary and without humiliation or violence. He wanted the worst punishment to be his own displeasure and sorrow at the bad thing done. Of course, this could only be effective when there was genuine affection binding the boys to him. And he was careful to keep this from being a "sentimental" thing. If a boy was incorrigible and had to be expelled then it had to be done without uproar and for a reason that wouldn't damage the boy's reputation with peers. All of this was part of his Method of Liberty. The goal was to win the trust and liking of a majority.

He looked for ways and make this happen. That was what he thought of as the method of love, and it is a method that works among adults just as it does among children. Love is not an approach that requires the special genius of Don Bosco in dealing with others but "works" for all. Don Bosco's goal was that the children he worked with should learn to use it with one another and in their dealings with adults. That it worked with adults is witnessed by the marvelous success Don Bosco had in winning them to support his work, not only financially but by their personal involvement. He thus created an institution dedicated to caring for street children. He sought to turn everyone's attention from self and personal affairs to caring for and helping others. When one lives the love of Christ in this way wonderful things happen. We are invited to do just this, day by day.

PREPARING OURSELVES TO EMBRACE CHRIST

A reflection by St. Pope John Paul II

Tomorrow the Church will celebrate the coming of God as a tiny child of poor parents to God's temple and the center of Israel's and our faith. The message which the Spirit of God arranged in providence for us was given when an old man, Simeon, took the child in his arms and blessed both God and the child's parents, and all of us with them. Note that the message God has prepared for us is implicit in the event itself.

The event is an encounter between the Messiah and God's temple. But it is an encounter that is accomplished personally and very humanly. An old man who has longed even more than all of us have for the coming of the Savior sees his hope fulfilled, at least in germ. On seeing this child this man began to utter words that were not of merely human provenance. They were words of prophesy. They were given him through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and his knowledge of Scripture. They are words of the God in whose honor the temple had been built and who was its Lord.

Simeon's words are enshrined in what is called the Song of Simeon and themselves are now part of Scripture and given us as spiritual nourishment. They bear witness to the light. They ante-date by some thirty years the witness given by John the Baptist. What is more, they end in a witness to the cross, on which the contradiction that we face when we stand in the presence of Christ is given tangible expression. That is what we will experience tomorrow. How are we to prepare?

Perhaps we can do no more than the mother whose soul, it was prophesied, would be pierced by a sword. Why was she pierced in this way? It was "*so the thoughts of many hearts may be laid bare*", to use Simeon's own words. We prepare with her for the mystery of the Passover of our Lord as it will happen in our lives. We are invited to recognize, and to embrace, with the child, our own passion and death. The meaning of Jesus' own life is found fully only on the cross as the necessary prelude to his resurrection. So today we prepare for our own cross and renew our hope for our resurrection. We recognize that this cannot happen in a merely personal way but only as part of our belonging to a community of faith and to the entire communion of saints, of whatever time and place. This is something we need to do every day. But the celebration of the Presentation of Our Lord in his Temple will be a wonderful opportunity for us to enter, in knowing faith, into God's loving plan for our lives and even whatever crosses they may involve. And we can begin to learn to do this so that the hearts of many others will be joined with ours in that offering, even as they are joined with the offering of Jesus.

THE PEACE GOD GIVES US IN CHRIST

A reflection by Timothy of Jerusalem

“The just live forever and their reward is in the Lord; their hope in the Most High.” In every saint we are shown some part of God’s love and grace as a gift to share. Today we see two such holy ones, Simeon and the Virgin Mary. Let’s begin with Simeon.

He had already received from God the knowledge that he would not die and depart this present life until he had seen the Christ. But he received much more. He took Jesus into his arms and enfolded life eternal in his love and joy.

Simeon the righteous longed to see the Lord and by God’s special grace did see him, and recognized him for who he was, and opened his arms wide to receive Him. Then he called out to God for release from the life he had lived so long that he might be with God in the fullness that only the Christ can bring. We have all heard the words: ***“Now Lord, let your servant go in peace, as you promised; for I have seen your salvation.”***

I have seen, so let me depart in the peace of knowing you have fulfilled your promise to Israel and to all our race. I have seen your glory, seen the angels dancing, the archangels praising you, and all creation leaping for joy. I have seen the way from earth to heaven and into your one Kingdom. Now let me depart and be in that Kingdom.

He did not have to witness the insolence of those who rejected the Messiah, or the crown of thorns they gave him in place of the crown of love that he deserved. He did not have to see slaves beating their Lord, a spear being thrust into his side, nor the sun itself darkened and the moon failing and the elements of the world altered.

But Mary did have to see all these things, as have to see them in our way. We too, however, can pray with Simeon, ***“Lord now let your servant go in peace”***. Simeon saw the salvation prepared for all peoples, our salvation and that of Mary, the Virgin Mother. We join her in empathic suffering with Christ, her son and our brother.

In doing this we are learning how to share feelings with others and so to reach out to them both to share with them and to bring them the comfort that Christ alone gives. It does not take away that suffering but gives it a new and transforming meaning. Mary leads us along this way. That is one of her many gifts to us. What is true love if it doesn’t constantly reach out to others in whatever their needs may be? But in Christ we find peace even in suffering and find the grace to place ourselves and our lives in our God’s hands. We know God reaches out to embrace and hold us even as Simeon was allowed to do for God incarnate. But don’t we embrace God incarnate when we receive another as Christ? Let us rejoice in knowing what a mighty work God can do through us by drawing us to see Christ in those we meet.

JESUS LEADS US TO PRAISE AND FAITH

A reflection by St. Pope John XXIII

How wonderful the humble woman who raised her voice to cry out, "*Blessed is she who gave you birth! Blessed the womb that bore you and the breasts that gave him milk!*" and more wonderful yet the prompt reply of Jesus, "*Blessed even more those who hear the word of God and keep it!*" Thus a direct link is established between the motherhood of Mary and the importance of faith in the teaching of her Son, Savior of the world! It reminds me of Elizabeth's joyful greeting that rang out through the hill country, "*Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord!*" Rightly did Mary reply, "*All generations will call me blessed!*"

The woman's cry was an affirmation of faith in Jesus and his message. She had heard and had believed and sought only to praise the faith that had made Jesus' birth possible. We too bless God for this message and for the faith that accepts it. How crucial this faith in the midst of the anxieties and threats that so constantly threaten our future and that of our race. And Jesus responds to our praise as he did to the humble woman who blessed his mother by drawing our attention to faith itself. He praises the spiritual fruit of faith through which his mother believed an angel's message and so entrusted herself to the mystery of the incarnation. As St. Augustine noted, "*Mary was much more blessed in having received and expressed faith in Christ yet to be conceived*" than in anything else. In her faith shines out so brightly, and it is the faith of Christ that binds us together in the Church and opens our ears to its teaching.

Think of how many people today have reached the point of wondering whether the heavens are empty and whether the Church's teaching is perhaps an illusion. They think they need to rebuild everything and without the moral law, the teaching on justice and the charity which Jesus Christ has taught the world. We indeed respect the traditions of our fathers, rooted in faith in our Savior, and expressed in the solemn "I believe" we pray each Sunday. Listen to the Scriptural warning, "*Be sober and on guard*" because the devil is about. We can only resist in faith. It needs to be noted that the very sermon that evoked the enthusiasm of the crowd among which the humble woman stood and whose faith evoked her cry of praise, is met with skepticism today.

O Jesus, Son of Mary, our brother and Savior, by the mystery of your body and blood, the body and blood you received in Mary's womb and share with us when gather around your altar, preserve in us the gift of faith. It is our salvation and the salvation of all. It is God's glory and your glory. Let it always be not only our glory but our joy. Let it be such today, and for eternity.