



# **SHARING IN JESUS' LOVE**

A reflection by Fr. Bernard Haering

*“When Jesus saw the crowds he went up on the mountainside and after he had sat down his disciples gathered around him and he began to teach them: Blessed are the poor in Spirit, the reign of God is theirs”.* (Matt. 5:1-12) Close attention is to be given to each word in this introduction to Jesus' first great discourse. It provides the key to understanding the entire Sermon on the Mount.

One might think Jesus went up the mountain to escape the crowd, but that contradicts the whole tenor of the gospel and of our faith. Jesus loves every person in that crowd. He came as the Savior of the world; he shed his blood on Calvary for all! Even when Jesus gathers his disciples around him, his heart goes out to everyone, even when he attends more specially to those who gather around him on the mount of beatitudes. We can't truly find Christ and abide with him unless we join him in his love for all people.

But for us to join him in this love we must genuinely join ourselves with him, and so come to know him intimately as our Emmanuel, our God with us as with all. Whoever conceives the main purpose of life as keeping busy, even with others, will never radiate the joy, goodness, gentleness and mercy of the Lord Jesus. If we wish to make Christ known to all we must first know him as friend. We must know Jesus as listeners, as persons ready to follow him even if the way is sometimes difficult and demands we learn a new way of loving.

We can never allow ourselves as Christians to flee others. But we are allowed, and even urged, to retreat from noise and distractions, the so-called “idols of the marketplace” when all are busy but not with love. We can never learn the wonder of the beatitudes by merely scientific study, though in no way do I want to minimize the value of theological research and reflection as scientific. But at the very heart of theology and Christian faith is the experience of Christ's personal nearness.

Jesus tells us: *“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me bears much fruit; apart from me you can't do anything.”* He does want us to do something. Christ, for instance, proclaims the beatitudes and shares with us his knowledge of the Heavenly Father, so that our hearts may be filled with joy and we may share it. If we truly abide in his love and rejoice in his nearness, treasuring up his words in our hearts and mind, then we will come to know what it means to say Jesus loves all. Then we too can become a source of joy for others.

Because of our self-centeredness we have to remind ourselves from time to time that we cannot be with Christ and rejoice in him unless we turn our eyes to the crowd, as he did when he went up the mountain and gathered us to himself. We know how by sharing in his love—a love that embraces us and all others. That is one more reason why we live in community. In gathering around Jesus we don't exclude others from coming to him.

# **CHANGING THE WORLD IN CHRIST**

**A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant**

**Who are the people who change the world? Paul tells us that God has chosen the foolish to shame the wise and the weak to shame the strong, and even the lowly and despised to reduce to nothing those who consider themselves some-thing. God has chosen people who live their lives according to the unselfish standards of the gospel, with love as their driving force. They don't live according to the ego-centered standards of a selfish society with personal comfort or gain as the driving force. They are the humble of the earth. They are the ones who seek justice. Some work in stores and some drive cabs and some are firefighters or managers or artists or media people or students or retired grandparents.**

**The Gospels show us that God does not conform to the standards of the world but turns those standards upside down. The Sermon on the Mount sketched a way of life that might be considered foolish by many, but not by those who really love as God loves. They will recognize the Beatitudes as examples of their own love in action. It is a love that they already show to their loved ones and those they live with. The challenge of the Beatitudes is to show this love to all whose paths we cross.**

**As we live in this way we change the world. We will be understanding in a world that disdains those who are different. We will be forgiving in a world bent on revenge. We will be unselfish despite the social admonition to get what one can by any necessary means. We will be patient in the face of demands for instant gratification. But will this really change the world? Of course it will.**

**It will first change that part of society in which we live. That is really all we have to do. However, if each one of us lives in this way we will influence each other in the carrying out the common task of changing the world. If we live our lives in this way—the “way” that Jesus taught—this will influence not only those around us but those around them and so on and on. Goodness spreads and goodness can make a difference.**

**Jesus promises that it will. He assures those who are willing to follow him that the Kingdom of Heaven will be theirs and that they will be comforted and actually inherit the earth. Who, then, will be the winner in the end? Who will turn out to have been a mover and shaker? We will see that they are the people whose lives manifest the Reign of God. They are the authentic movers and shakers of the world, now and forever more. Jesus teaches, and showed in his own life, that the poor, the sorrowing, the meek, the hungry for justice, the merciful, the clean of heart and the peacemakers change the world. Jesus has chosen us to be the world's movers and shakers. Blessed are the patient who trust in Jesus' words.**

# **THE POWER OF CHRIST'S LOVE**

A reflection developed from Butler's Lives of the Saints

St. John Bosco lived in a time of great turmoil in Italy, including political change and violent anti-clericalism. He was born into an abjectly poor family of farmers that became even poorer when his father died. Somehow, even as a boy, he began to dream of helping boys and girls for whom there was no future at home. They migrated to the cities looking for work and a future. Many became what we call "street children". At the age of 10, due to a dream, he set himself to learn skills—acrobatics and sleight of hand magic—that could be used to interest these effectively abandoned young people and then interest them in God and faith and the church.

He liked and loved his fellow young people and they loved him back and worked with him to help one another. St. John Cafasso, creator of all sorts of schools to provide the poor with an education in a trade, encouraged him. He decided to become a priest. He couldn't pay even for his clothes and was educated entirely through charity. After ordination St. John Cafasso introduced him to wealthy people from whom he could beg help, not only for street children but apprentices in various trades who were entirely on their own. Persuading his mother to keep house for him and help him with the children, he began to create a faith-centered approach to the young based entirely on love. He never used punishment but won cooperation by caring for those he helped in every way he could.

Without a regular priestly assignment, and the salary that went with one, he built make-shift schools and homes for young people. He even built them a church all their own. There was anti-clericalism everywhere and priests were often attacked, but he won over even the government of the Kingdom of Piedmont and was encouraged by it to expand his work. What happened seemed an ongoing miracle due only to prayer and the power to move hearts. Volunteers taught after their regular work in schools for literacy and basic arithmetic and trades. Convinced that joy was essential he also set up classes in music, which proved very popular.

One of his trade programs was for printing. He became a widely read author of self-help literature directed to the poor. He was also a very popular preacher and has a gift for healing. Pope Pius XI, who canonized him in 1934, remarked that in his life supernatural events were so common as to seem natural. He ended up founding three religious institutes, under the patronage of St. Francis de Sales, to extend care for poor children all over the world. His method, which he found very difficult to teach others, was love instead of punishment. It was that same love which drew so many into work for the poor, making the three types of Salesians the largest group of religious in the early modern church, and this in very difficult political and legal conditions. When he died the whole city of Turin turned out to honor him and accompany his remains to his grave. He had died, the doctors said, of exhaustion and wearing his body out in works of love.

# **SEEING OURSELVES IN CHRIST'S MIRROR**

## **A reflection by Symeon the New Theologian**

When Holy Scripture is being read we should look at ourselves in it as in a mirror. We should consider our state. Let me explain what I mean. We hear the Lord saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". This must make us examine and test ourselves as to whether we suffer humiliation when we are insulted, dishonored or treated with contempt. We do this to see whether we possess the virtue of humility. A humble person bears everything without feeling hurt or taking offense. Such a person's heart is not wounded by anything that happens. If one is slightly wounded one is not completely upset, yet because of that wound—that of having been slightly pained instead of accepting what happened with joy—one is distressed. One grieves and weeps and withdraws into the inner cell of the soul to fall down before God and confess his lack of humility.

Then again we hear: "Blessed are those who mourn". The Lord doesn't say "those who have mourned" but those who continually mourn. Here too we must examine ourselves. Do we mourn every day? If we have been made humble by repentance obviously we won't pass a single day or night without tears and mourning; i.e., without compunction.

And again: "Blessed are the meek". Can anyone who mourns every day continue to live in a state of anger and not, rather, become gentle? Just as water extinguishes a blazing fire so mourning and tears extinguish anger so completely that a person who has long been given over to it sees the irascible disposition that caused this transformed into the perfect serenity of humility.

Again we hear: "Blessed are the merciful". Who are the merciful? Are they persons who give away their possession to help others or feed the poor? No. Then who are they? They have become poor for the sake of the One who became poor for our sake, those who have nothing to give. Yet in a spiritual fashion they are always mindful of the poor, widows, orphans and the sick. Seeing them they have compassion and even shed burning tears over them. When they have anything they cheerfully give alms, as well as ungrudgingly remind all of how one can save one's soul. This is a great gift. What such a one has received one passes on without grudging. These are the truly merciful.

It is in virtue of this that God proclaims the pure of heart blessed. The pure see God in everything and are reconciled to God in all that happens. Peace exists between God and us, God's creatures. We were once God's enemies but now we have allowed God to make peace between us and so are peacemakers. That is how one comes to be called, and to be, a child of God. Can you see yourself in these beatitudes? Do they show you yourself and God's merciful love for you? Look very carefully!

# **DO YOU LONG TO BE WITH JESUS?**

A reflection taken from a homily by Origen of Alexandria

Let's think about the way Providence arranged everything so that Simeon could come to the Temple and embrace Jesus, the Son of God. In the first place, Simeon had been given a revelation by the Holy Spirit. He had been promised that he would not die before he had seen God's Anointed. In the second place, he didn't come to the Temple by chance or as a matter of routine. He came under the prompting of the Spirit of God.

Do you want to embrace Jesus? Do you want to enfold him in your arms? Then strive with all your might to follow the guidance of the Spirit and come to God's Temple! At this very moment you are in God's temple and that means you are in the Lord Jesus. You are in God's Church, the temple built of living stones, and if your life and conduct are really worthy of the name of the Church, then you are "standing" in the Lord.

Led by the Spirit, you come to the temple and you find the Lord Jesus. Lift him up in your arms and say: "Now, Lord, let your servant go in peace, as you promised!" Notice how peace is joined to being dismissed from the tasks of this life and so with death. Simeon doesn't say only that he wants to go to God but adds that he longs to go in peace. The promise of peace is one that was made to Abraham. God promised: "*You shall go to your ancestors in peace when you have reached a ripe old age.*" Who is it that dies in peace? It is the person who has that peace of God which surpasses all understanding. It guards the heart of its possessor. Who is it that departs from this world in peace? It is the person who understands that God has been reconciling the world to himself in Christ and has been working with Christ. Such a one has gained complete concord and peace with God through these works done in and with Christ.

But we don't need to speak of patriarchs. It is far better to speak of Jesus, the prince and lord of patriarchs. St. Paul tells us that "it is better to die and to be with Christ". One who possesses Jesus can say this, and add: "It is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me".

So we stand in the temple and we are given the Son of God. We embrace him and we turn to almighty God in prayer, and to Jesus himself. We ask that we may be found worthy to be released from our burdens and trials so that we can be with Jesus. How I long, how we all long, to speak with Jesus and to embrace him always and to be with Him in the presence of the Heavenly Father forever. That is what we want. That is why we have come here. That is what we will seek to do this day and each day until we are called to Jesus.

## **THE OPPORTUNITY TO SPEND ONESELF FOR CHRIST**

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller

We have just celebrated one of the special feasts of the liturgical year which invites us to spend ourselves heroically for God. We are reminded how very powerful the light of the sun is and how purifying fire can be. All this is summed up in the symbol that is a candle—so easily snuffed out, as we are and as the message of the Gospel seems to be. Yet God's Providence has seen to it that this seeming fragile light has overpowered even the mightiest of earthly forces. The Gospel is everywhere and its spread has been unstoppable in spite of the seeming fragility of those who bear and proclaim it. The lives of so many have been snuffed out but not the "light of the Gospel".

These reminders are intended as challenges. Are you and I willing and ready to bear the Gospel to whomever God sends our way, and at whatever cost that may require? We remember great saints who have done this, and now our God pays us the compliment of telling us we can do as much as they. In their own day Abraham or Sarah or Rebekah didn't seem to be heroes of faith, at least to themselves. We probably have the same modest idea about our own responses to God's call.

Do you recall Paul's words to the Galatians? "*If you belong to Christ, you are descendants of Abraham and Sarah*". The Letter to the Hebrews makes explicit the fact that Jesus "*did not come to help angels but the children of Abraham and Sarah*". Jesus came not just to shed the light upon the world but to support us in doing it. The prophet Isaiah might have spoken directly to us: "*I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing and uselessly spent my strength*", and then he continues, speaking in God's name, "*but I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth*". From Isaiah's point of view we live at the ends of the earth, and precisely there have been given a light that isn't to be hidden but set on a lampstand so all may see it and come to know God.

We don't know how to make our witness effective. Try as we might, that has to be left to God. Salvation is God's to give and hearts are God's to move. We just have to agree to bear whatever cross may be needed to make that light enter into and transform those God calls. When Jesus was presented in the Temple two prophets came forward to remind Mary and Joseph that their son would bear a cross and seemingly be rejected by many, and that they too would experience that cross. That is why as we recall that event, and the Feast of the Presentation, we are given a call to Gospel heroism. It may seem that we do nothing heroic but that is for God to decide and for those who come after us to recognize. Our task is simply to obey: Let your word, O Lord, be done in me. Come, Lord, and be my strength and consolation, and victory.

# **HOW MARY HELPS US FIND JESUS**

A reflection developed from a homily by Origen of Alexandria

When Jesus was twelve he went with his parents to Jerusalem but when they left he stayed behind without telling them. Realizing they had not seen him, Mary and Joseph searched the whole caravan but he was not to be found. His own parents, who had brought him up and cared for him through dangers like the flight into Egypt, didn't know where to find him!

How often have we anxiously searched for Jesus, without knowing where to look? Mary & Joseph began looking in the wrong places. Jesus isn't found just anywhere, or in just any gathering. Mary finally led Joseph to look for him among those who dedicate themselves to the study of God's word. They found these people in the Temple, God's own House.

We too must look for Jesus in God's House and among those devoted to the prayerful study of God's word. Why is it important for us to look in such a place and at a time when God's word is being pondered? We want to hear Jesus ask questions but, above all, answer his and our questions. Don't be disturbed by questions you can't answer. Mary heard many such questions and responded by pondering them as the learned teachers with whom Jesus sat had been doing all their lives. Listen to these questions and bring them to Jesus. Then listen carefully. He will answer them through your prayer and anxious seeking.

Mary too had to learn how to bring her questions to her son, the Son of God, and then to ponder his answers—which were sometimes as difficult to understand as had been her questions. We must look for Jesus in the Church and among the teachers who do not depart from the tradition of its teaching and understanding of Jesus. If we seek Jesus in this way we will find Him. We find him among those who already possess an understanding of God's will and word. Jesus was sitting among such people—didn't he promise that if just two or three gathered in His name he would be among them? He was not sitting passively but asking questions, and giving answers. All were amazed, we are told, most of all by his answers. Through him God already spoke.

In order that we too may be among Jesus hearers and put questions to him and listen attentively to his answers, we must let Mary guide us to the Church and to its genuine teachers. We must seek this anxiously, as she did. The search for Jesus can't be a passing concern but a daily one. And what does he say when he hears our anxious questions? Look for me in my Father's House. Look for me in the community of those who believe and who seek with me to discern the Heavenly Father's will. Don't you know that a son has to be in the House of his Father? That House is where God's will is sought and found. Finding it we must say with Mary, Let your will be done in me!