

Growing in Repentance

A reflection taken from a homily by Gregory Palamas

“The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a person who sowed good seed in a field but when all were asleep an enemy came and sowed darnel among the wheat.” (Mt. 13) Darnel looks like wheat when it’s growing but it doesn’t bear edible grain. Among Christians there are quite a few who look like imitators of Christ but aren’t. As the Lord himself explains, the darnel, the wheat-look-alike, is really the offspring of the Evil One. That is because darnel people behave in the way evil one does. People who do that show they come of the Evil One’s sowing and are his children by adoption. They will receive their reward at harvest time, at the end of the world.

The Lord’s reapers are angels. In the parable they ask their Lord what to do about the darnel. Scripture says, *“at the end of the world the Son of Man will send his angels and they will gather out of his Kingdom all evildoers and every cause of sin”*. The Lord’s servants, the angels of God, saw wicked and impious people living among the good and asked if they should gather them up. In effect they asked, “Shall we kill them to remove them?” The Lord’s reply was “No!” Why? The fact is that many godless sinners who live among people who are upright and devout do repent in time and are converted and learn habits of piety and virtue; they cease to be darnel and become wheat. That would have been destroyed if the angels had removed the darnel-people before they repented. Moreover, many while living evil lives produce children who are good, and may have other rightly disposed descendants.

The Lord, who sees everything before it comes to be, would not permit the loss of good people. When the end comes it will be time to separate the good from the evildoers. So those who want to be saved must not be darnel but wheat and they will become wheat by bringing forth the fruits of repentance. Thus they will be fit for the eternal granary and will be called children of the Heavenly Father and enter God’s Kingdom rejoicing.

We must avoid saying or doing anything evil or useless and practice virtue. This will lead us, like the converted darnel, to be resplendent with divine glory. May all of us come to this through the grace and loving kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ. To grow in Christ one must begin by repenting for then one can grow in all kinds of wondrous gifts and virtues. These will build others up and help make them too fit for God’s Kingdom and glory.

GOD MAKES THE IMPERFECT PERFECT

A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

One of the great disappointments of my life has been the painful realization that every religious group or organization I belong to is riddled with imperfection and even failure. Every group is made up of limited human beings, and I'm not the only person who has felt disillusionment at this. There are poor liturgies, uninspiring sermons, sexism, racism, disregard for the needy, abuse of power and authority and even sexual abuse. Yes, there are many who stand against such evils and strive to eliminate them. There is no excuse for such imperfect, evil, sin and even wickedness. Yet these things are found in every part of God's Church.

Jesus was well aware of this. The field sown by God's grace contains both wheat and weeds that look-like-wheat (darnel), as well as weeds that don't look like anything but weeds. But who is going to do the eliminating? Are there perfect people who can spot the imperfect and throw them out? Besides, who really determines who is bad and who is good? That is Jesus' task and he refuses to do it the way we want him to. What if Peter had been weeded out, or Paul or Augustine of Hippo or Charles de Foucauld or any of the people God has graced with repentance? Until the end of time the Church will always be a gathering of sinners, as Pope Francis not too long ago reminded us.

In the meantime, how are we supposed to live in this mixed church of so many types of sinners? The Gospel tells us to be understanding and compassionate and kind. The parable of the Sower is coupled with (e.g.) the parable of the Mustard Seed. This tiny seed grows into something so great that all sorts of birds can nest in it! Are all the birds alike? Do all sing sweetly? Do some make messes? Those who want to live in Jesus' Church have to be ready to accept all kinds of people who come seeking shelter and help from him. What he intends is that the community of the Church be life-giving for all. And he intends to create this with all the sorts of imperfect people like you and me.

It is through give and take with selfish, inconsiderate sinners like ourselves that we learn to be understanding, patient, tolerant and forgiving. But we have to let the grace of God work in us and in our living. We have to let Jesus refine and strengthen and purify us. After all, it is God's Church that is destined for the life of God's Kingdom. There "all will shine like the sun". If we want to be of that number we will have to let grace make us like Jesus.

REALLY BECOMING LIKE CHRIST

A reflection developed from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

The sons of Zebedee put pressure on Jesus by asking to be given the two highest places after his own in the Kingdom of Heaven. Listen carefully to his replay to them and ask what it implies about your efforts to follow Christ and become “another Christ”, as we say.

Jesus knows that they weren't looking for something that was purely spiritual. He also knows that they would be afraid to ask for what they did if they knew what it would take to prepare them for the places they wanted. He is quite explicit: “You don't know what you're asking for! Are you ready to drink the cup I'm about to drink or be baptized in the way I'm about to be?” They were thinking of rewards and honors and being exalted, but Jesus was thinking of struggles and difficulties and being rejected and scorned. They thought the time of rewards, the end time, was at hand but Jesus knew that this was not so and that their lives would be filled with dangers and pains and even martyrdom.

Notice how the Lord not only corrects them but draws them on to want to become like him and even suffer as he would suffer. He didn't talk about death and being martyred. He didn't say, Are you ready to shed your blood? but Are you ready to drink the cup I drink and be baptized with my baptism? He lures them on to want more intensely to become like him and do all that he was to do. He calls it a “baptism” to show there will be a great cleansing. And they replied as he hoped they would: We can! They were determined to do as he did.

What did the Lord do? He promised them that they would indeed do as he was about to do and suffer as he was about to suffer, but again by using symbolic language. He prophesied, in effect, great blessings—like the blessing of martyrdom that James would very soon suffer. He tells them that they will become fit to be martyrs and undergo a violent death for God. In this they will be partners with Christ. They will want only places that God has foreordained for them, and not worry about being more than or over others.

Are you among the disciples of Christ? When the companions of James and John heard what they had asked for they got angry and jealous. How imperfect they all were, just as we are. James and John had tried to get preferred to everyone else and made the rest jealous. But look at them a few years later when they were ready to be martyrs and to suffer all the things Christ had. Grace had reshaped them, James perhaps more than the others, since he was one of the first to die for Christ. Do you want to be first among your companions?

OUR HOPE TOO IS GOD'S GRACE

A reflection inspired by a discourse of St. John Damascene

How many of the millions of devout Jews in the generation of Mary and Joseph are remembered? Yet today we remember an obscure couple, living in an obscure town most thought to be of no importance, and who did nothing extraordinary. They worshipped God with all their hearts, but had a daughter. Ordinarily people prayed to have a son “to carry on their name” but this couple, who prayed continually and with deep emotion, was given a daughter. But the child was to be the mother of the Messiah, the one all Israel had so long hoped for, and she was to conceive him as a virgin! It may be that she was even more devout than her parents; she was so close to God that an angel addressed her as “full of grace”. God often gives more!

It was this girl child of obscure parents of a doubly obscure village in an obscure part of the world. But God chose her to become the mother of the Divine Son and so the Mother of God and probably the most famous woman there has ever been. No wonder her parents' names, almost alone among those of their generation, are remembered and honored, and have been for more than two thousand years.

Joachim and Anne had Mary by the special grace of God, the same grace that made her everything she became and led her to freely accept all that she was asked to be no matter what the personal price. All she had to know to accept everything was to be told that it was done by God's choice and will. I am your slave, she said; let it be done to me according to God's will. And she was faithful to this acceptance through an entire lifetime and even under great trials and hardships—physical, psychological, social and personal.

You who read these words probably never thought that you would be remembered as Mary has been, or as Joachim and Anne have. But what happened to them depended wholly on God's free grace. What happens to you, and the impact you have on those who live with you and after you, likewise depends wholly on your God's gracious will. What is our hope? It is God's grace, given to us superabundantly out of love. Will you accept this as your only hope? That's what Mary did. Will you consent to the Lord's request that you live a seemingly obscure life and leave behind you when you are called home, only what God wants you to? God asks us this each day, asks us to be faithful to our own “Yes” through an entire lifetime. Amen!

THE HINDRANCES TO HOLINESS LIE WITHIN

A reflection developed from a sermon by Cardinal Newman

We need to let go of empty excuses for our failure to be holy. The problem is not outside us but within. If the course of our life is to be changed it must be from within, where God's grace and our own wills move us. If we don't love God whole heartedly it's because we haven't wanted to, tried to and prayed to. We haven't kept the idea and the wish in our minds day by day and in all the day's little matters and haven't lamented that we haven't loved enough but have been indolent, sluggish, worldly, carnal and haven't begun at the beginning—that is from inward efforts. We have been like people who can't get themselves up in the morning and waited to be changed once and for all by some great outward event. We long for some-thing miraculous or complain about our circumstances and our many cares and worries and imagine a better time or place when all will go right!

Are we going to rouse ourselves and act like reasonable people rather than expecting what never happens to anyone? Are we finally ready to do what we know we need to do before it is too late? It is a first truth in faith that the only way to heaven is the love of heaven. Sight of Jesus won't be enough. If it was why did Judas persist in greed and thievery in the very presence of Christ? Satan was a shining archangel but he fell. Nor will some bit of reasoning turn the trick. Aren't we told that the Gospel, in the sight of the reason obsessed Greeks, seemed foolishness? Nor will excited or exalted feelings convert us for the Lord tells a parable about people who receive God's word with joy and yet persevere only a little while because the word hasn't taken root deep inside them.

There isn't anything but the love of God that can make a person believe in God or obey God. We have to pray to the One who has prepared such good things for those who love—things that are beyond human ability to understand—we have to pray to God to pour into our hearts such love that will enable us to love God above every other things or persons. God has promised us more than we can even imagine. We only need to pray for the love that brings us to the fulfillment of God's promises. What is promised is God's very self! The first step toward possessing this gift of all gifts is prayer for it. Dare to pray for God's very self. Pray to love God even more than yourself.

TURNING OURSELVES TOWARD GOD

**A reflection developed from a Scripture commentary by
Abbot Rupert of Deutz**

“Israel, come back to the Lord, your God; you have fallen on your face in your sin!” This is not simply the word of Hosea, the prophet. It is Christ himself who speaks in this way. Christ, the goal of all achievement, who has been sent to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” and who began his preaching with the words: *“Repent! The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!”*

Some may hear this and reply just as did those to whom Peter preached on the day of Pentecost. *“What shall we do, brethren?”* was their question, and it should be ours. To all who are frightened by their own sin and who feel contrition and want forgiveness and help, we can reply using the words of Hosea. *“Take words with you! Return to the Lord and say to him: Take away all our iniquity, accept what is good, and let us offer the fruit of our lips.”* But how can words be enough?

Why should we go to the Lord with words rather than with gifts, especially the gift of good deeds? First, we are to confess that God is not one to make things difficult for us. God doesn't require things you might find it hard to come by. So we aren't told to take gold or silver or goats and calves or things of these sorts. But mere words seem to cost us nothing! They are words of confession and supplication and all that is required is that you take these for in God's eyes they will suffice—supposing, of course, that they come from the heart, the whole heart.

Provided with these words of the heart, words out of the depths of the heart, return to the Lord God. God has no need for goods. All God wants is that we sincerely ask that our iniquity be taken away and that what is good in us be accepted. You can't say, “I have no iniquity”. That would be a lie. If you said that you would be deceiving yourself. Our sins are many but ask with confidence that God accept what is good and we will offer our praise and love—what was called the “fruit of our lips”. God has no need of the blood of animals. God asks only our love expressed in praise and gratitude. We are to offer a “sacrifice of praise”, as Scripture calls it. Why does this please God? Because it is the evidence of a good will. What is that? It is the love of what is good just because it is good; it is a perfectly free love. Share the good God has placed within your heart, and give what you share in perfectly free love and praise of God. That is all God asks.

THE MANY ASPECTS OF FREEDOM

A reflection inspired by a homily by St. Augustine of Hippo

Scripture speaks of two Jerusalems, one on our earth and the other above with God. Lazarus and his two sisters, Martha and Mary, lived only a short distance from the earthly Jerusalem. In it they saw the Temple, the symbol of the freedom God had given all those who belonged to his covenant and they hoped in it. But it was only earthly, and was soon to be destroyed. By taking it away our God called us to a kind of freedom we didn't even think we lacked, because we hadn't faced our fears carefully enough to realize that what is necessary is to turn to God in God's Son, Jesus Christ.

During this life we are wandering exiles from the Jerusalem above and we long to come to it and have much toil and sorrow until we do. We are often afraid we won't reach it. Yet the Lord Jesus shows us that such fears can cripple us and are unnecessary. This is made very clear in the story of his visit to the house of Lazarus and Mary and Martha.

The prophets of Israel longed for a city not perpetually threatened. They spoke to people more driven by fear of losing worldly things they had than finding God's Kingdom where there is no loss. They didn't think of it as not of this world. We do, and should long for it the more. When Jesus visited Lazarus the man wasn't sick, yet soon afterwards he died. Jesus called him back to life. Do we fear he won't do this for us on the last day? Does our faith free us from fear of death?

Like Martha you have a host of daily duties. Are you afraid they will get in the way of your relationship with God? Do you fear that will prevent you from entering God's Kingdom? But what if you always do them in the presence of Jesus and thinking of Jesus? If you are thinking of him you are free from what you fear. Or perhaps you are able to spend much time listening to Jesus' words, pondering them and meditating, but are you a prisoner of the need to study more, understand better, and even see how Jesus' words free you from the fear that motivates much of our studying? Can you trust Jesus like Mary and meditate and pray without fearing the imperfections and weaknesses that keep you from doing it as well as you wish?

We call Jesus our redeemer. Evidently we were captives. Can anything come between us and God's love? Do our fears sell us into a captivity we don't recognize? Jesus has set us free. He comes to our homes, our work, our study and meditation. Are you ready to have your heart set free of everything that is not God, even from your fears?