

THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

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HOW CHRIST PREPARES US TO FOLLOW HIM

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Ephrem the Syrian

Jesus took three apostles up a mountain for three reasons. First, he wanted to show them the glory of his divinity. Second, he wanted to declare plainly that he is Israel's redeemer. Third, he wanted to prevent the apostles from being scandalized at seeing him endure the many sufferings he freely accepted for our sake. Note that he accepted them for OUR sake. All that he did applies as much to us as it did to the apostles.

The apostles knew Jesus was human but they did not know him as God. In their experience he was the son of Mary, a human being who shared their daily life in this world. On the mountain he reveals that he is the Son of God, that he is actually God. Peter, James and John were familiar with the sight of their master eating and drinking, working and resting, growing tired and falling asleep, breaking out in a sweat and experiencing fear. All these things naturally go with humanity, but not with divinity. That is why he took them up a mountain and enabled them to hear the Father's voice calling him "Son". He showed that he is truly the Son of God and himself divine. He does this for us as much as for the apostles.

Jesus took these disciples up the mountain so they would see his kingship before they witnessed his passion. He showed his mighty power before they watched him die. He revealed his glory before they beheld his humiliation. When he was taken captive and condemned to the cross, those who witnessed these things would understand that it was not due to a lack of power on Jesus' part but because he permitted himself to be crucified by his enemies. He does this for us as much as for the apostles.

Jesus freely chose to suffer as he did for the world's salvation. He takes us all up this mountain even before his resurrection and reveals the glory of his divinity so that when he was risen from the dead in that same divine glory all would realize that this was not something given him as a reward for his labors, as if he had previously been without it. That glory had been his with the Heavenly Father from all eternity, as is clear from the words he spoke as he approached his passion: "*Father, glorify me now with the glory I had with you before the world was made.*"

Those who follow Jesus must follow him to the cross as surely as to his glory. We must be prepared to accept our humanity as we acknowledge our sin. We must be prepared to take up our cross and carry it every day until we have suffered all that is required to "*fill up the sufferings of Christ for his Church*". We must believe that we will be raised up with Christ in the same way we suffer with Christ. We have not been saved from suffering. Because we share with Christ we need not be afraid of what we are to suffer. We too suffer with Christ for the salvation of the world and through this we humans will share in the glory of divinity. Do not be afraid. Christ is with us always.

HOLINESS CONSISTS IN LIKENESS TO CHRIST

A reflection from Christ in His Mysteries by Bl. Columba Marmion

What we see in the transfiguration is a revelation of our own future greatness. We shall participate in Christ's glory. How can this be? It is a gift that is part of the inheritance that is Christ's. He gives this to us as members of his Body and he can do it because he is the Son of God. Listen to St. Leo the Great: "*By this mystery of the transfiguration, God's wonderful providence laid the foundations of the Church's hope, teaching the whole Body of Christ the nature of the transformation it is to undergo. It has already been shown in our Head.*"

Even in this world we are God's children by grace. What we are going to become as a result of this adoption had not yet appeared. It will appear when God's lightnings have shaken the earth to its foundations, and those who have been justified will rise to glory. "*They will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father*". Their bodies will be resplendent like that of Christ on Tabor; they will be transfigured by the very same clarity that illuminates the incarnate Word. Saint Paul makes it clear: "*He will refashion this lowly body of ours, conforming it to the likeness of his own glorified body*".

We shouldn't assume that on the holy mountain the sacred humanity of the Lord was endowed with all the splendor now beaming from it in Heaven. The disciples saw only a single ray of that glory—yet it was enough to lift them out of themselves. It was an overflowing of the Godhead upon the sacred humanity. Eternal life was always hidden in Christ, but at that hour something of that light flamed out from its glowing center and set his very body on fire. It was no borrowed light, coming from without, but rather a manifestation of the ineffable majesty always contained and concealed within our Lord. For love of us, Jesus usually hid the divine life that was in him under the guise of mortal flesh and blood. At the transfiguration the Word set his glory free to irradiate the humanity he has assumed.

What we must be convinced of is that holiness consists in our likeness to Christ Jesus. It is a flowing through us of the divine life. It is not perfect now nor is it something we achieve of ourselves. Our baptism was a dawning of this holiness through the grace of Christ. As Scripture puts it: "*God predestined us to be conformed to the image of the Son*". Little by little this likeness grows. Our work is to be faithful to the action of the Holy Spirit, as deepening and developing it even to the fullness of eternal life. The Spirit does this by teaching us to love one another truly and daily. Then, when the Kingdom has fully come, all will be able to see the transformation that has taken place. It will be an inexhaustible spring of joy for us. It will be our divine adoption made perfect by our sharing of the Trinitarian life that is divine love.

DRAWING CLOSER TO CHRIST

A reflection developed from Receive Light by Fr. Gregory Collins

One of the best ways to come close to Christ is to meditate on the Gospel accounts of his transfiguration. Tradition says it occurred on Mt. Tabor and so we must go with him and climb that holy mountain as it shines in the full splendor of glory to come, the glory of Jesus that he would share with us. Jesus unveils the deepest truth about himself before three chosen apostles and he will do it for us too. He will teach us important things about ourselves as well.

First, Jesus takes the apostles away to be alone with Him. The story of the transfiguration shows us that if we wish to focus properly on Christ, and so come to the full and personal knowledge of the truth about Him and our relationship with him, we must let him lead us into solitude and prayer. The apostles didn't discern the truth about Christ, or about themselves, in the midst of a crowd. Nor did they hear the Heavenly Father's voice in the chaos and confusion of their ministry with Jesus. If God would speak, you must be silent.

The second important thing revealed by the transfiguration is that one cannot remain permanently on the mountain-top. One must return to the chaos and confusion of the plain and of our living together. Peter, after all, had hoped to capture his transfiguring experience by building booths and remaining there. It simply could not be. These eye-witnesses of the glory had to descend and help others. As St. Pope Gregory the Great says, the life of an apostle entails a constant oscillation between the glorious vision in solitary prayer and the struggle to serve the members of one's community.

Finally, Maximus the Confessor suggests that when we take the Bible into solitude and prayer, and listen attentively to the word of God, we are doing something similar to what the three apostles did as they climbed the mountain with Jesus. We reveal our hearts to the word in Scripture and to Jesus. We may, by God's grace, catch a glimpse of the True Word, the incarnate Lord Jesus. For the biblical words with their images and ideas are like the clothing of the Word Incarnate. Just as Christ's clothes were suddenly shining with the uncreated light of divine glory, becoming dazzlingly white, so the words of the Bible may suddenly catch fire from the Word who clothes himself in them to speak to us.

The secret of it all is self-giving. The life of the Trinity is self-giving and it is likewise the very being of God's Word. Jesus wants to share that self-giving with us. But we can't give ourselves only to Jesus. He calls us to give of ourselves to others, and to one another in our community of life. If we would be transfigured we must first give ourselves in solitude and prayer, and then give ourselves in service, and all this in a way that shares what we have personally seen with Jesus on our mountain top.

DEEPENING DEVOTION IN OUR FASTING

Developed from a sermon by St. Bernard

My beloved, I beg you to keep the Lenten fast with complete devotion. If we have done this so far, we should show even greater devotion in the time ahead. St. Benedict requires monks to fast from food until the ninth hour of the day and now, during Lent, the entire church does this with us. And let us not be troubled by weakness. The enemy seeks most of all to empty our fasting of devotion, and so to empty our sacrifice of the spiritual richness it properly has, which will rob us in the end of spiritual joy.

God loves a cheerful giver, Scripture tells us. And if we live the gift of self to God with fidelity and strength we build up our conscience. I mean that we will cease to try to give ourselves excuses instead of being faithful to our promise to give our entire selves to God. Besides, we have such wonderful examples to imitate. It was Moses who handed down the obligation of fasting to God's People. Think of Elijah and his recommendations of fasting. If Moses and Elijah commend this present fast how can we lose heart? Our Lord himself gave us the example by fasting for forty days. What kind of Christian fasts with small devotion?

Does the number of days we fast discourage you? Remember that St. Benedict tells us the whole of life should have a Lenten character. We should continue Lent throughout our entire lives! Do you think these few days are sufficient for repentance? You are clearly in error. We sin throughout our lives and so must ever repent. Seek the Lord, says the prophet. He didn't mean to seek God for only 40 days. Seek the Lord, he says, while he is near! In the present life we don't yet possess the Lord, so we need help. Recall the man who was a victim of robbers. Who was blessed? The one who showed him mercy! Are we ready to show mercy to one another by helping one another repent?

So if your zeal has somewhat abated during recent days, it is time to rekindle your fervor of spirit. If only your belly had sinned perhaps fasting would be enough. But if other members of your body have sinned why should they not fast as well. Let the eye fast, the tongue fast, the hand and even the soul fast.

Let the eye fast from merely curious glances. Let the ear fast if it itches for news and rumors and whatever has no relation to salvation. Let the tongue fast from grumbling and slander and unkind comments, and sometimes too we must recall the importance of silence. Let the hand fast from making useless gestures and from all work that is not needed to serve others. Most of all let the soul fast. Let it fast from vices and from doing what is merely its own will and not God's. Without this kind of fasting the ordinary kind cannot please God. The prophet condemned those who did their own wills on fast days and not the Lord's. We need to fast by serving other's good and efforts to repent. We need to fast from giving ourselves to anything that is not part of the Lord's service. Let us do it with the greatest devotion, imitating our Lord Christ in this and in all things.

HOPING WHOLE HEARTEDLY IN THE LORD

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Bernard

“One who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will say to the Lord, you are my protector and my refuge, my God in whom I hope.” We say it with thanksgiving, praising God and God’s mercy. Everyone who is not yet in the Lord’s Kingdom needs to pray thus. We need to flee temptation, and if we don’t always flee fast enough the Lord still protects us.

When people fall some are bruised and some are not. The only difference is that those who flee to the Lord are raised up stronger than before and others are not. Those who have a right relationship with the Lord simply fall into his hands. In some marvelous way the Lord makes even sin work for justice and right. We know, you see, that everything works for the good for people who love God.

Anyone who falls and is humble is protected, as it were, by that humility. This is personal care that God shows each of us. We all should look upon God as our very own. God never fails to see what is going on with us. That is why we can always hope in our God, and always will hope.

Thus the faithful say to the Lord: You are my protector. All creatures can say: You are my creator. Animals may say: You are my shepherd. All humans may say: You are my redeemer. But only the one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High may say: You are my protector. And such a one adds: You are my God. Why doesn’t such a person say: You are our God? Because although God is the God of all in creation, redemption, and other such benefits common to us all, yet in their temptations it is the elect alone who have God, as it were, as their very own. For God is ready to protect the falling in such a way as to seem to have turned from everything else just to protect that single person.

Therefore, let everyone who has chosen faith look to God as being their very own. Who could ever become careless while having eyes for God alone? Keep your eyes fixed on God for God’s eyes are constantly turned toward you. When God is looking down on you, searching and judging not only your actions but even the inmost motions of your heart and spirit, how can you fail to consider God your very own? I must not be one of those who fail to hope in the Lord.

But what about the fruit, the reward, the prize? God will deliver you from the snare of the hunter, and from the sharp word. God will deliver you so as to bring you safely into the Kingdom of Heaven. We are sure of God just in the measure we are sure of God’s love for us individually. He has assured us of this.

THE LORD SHATTERS ALL HUMAN SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Developed from The Prophetic Imagination by Walter Brueggemann

The Exodus narrative is designed to convince us that God shatters every humanly self-sufficient plan that opposes the Divine Plan for salvation. The Egyptians sought to control everything according to their ideas of how to make life good. They react to the Lord's demand that Israel be allowed to worship God according to his design without trying to understand it. Their attitude is summed up, "*Let heavier work be laid upon the Israelites that they may labor at it and pay to regard to lying words. So the taskmasters and foremen of the people went out and said to the People, Thus says Pharaoh..*".

Notice how the response is shaped by anger and resentment at whatever disrupts the Egyptian system of control. But in the end the system is vanquished and Pharaoh is humiliated and the arrangements made by Egyptian power disappears from history. "*The Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again*". That is how things are summed up before Israel passes through the sea and out of Egyptian control. The narrative treats this as a rejection of the power of Egypt's gods. Their power is nullified by the Lord of freedom. Humanly shaped and controlled religion gets nowhere. A religious politics of oppression is overcome in a way that establishes an order of justice and compassion.

Between the beginning and this end, the plague stories illustrate how the dismantling of political control is accomplished. At first the Lord's wonders are matched by Egyptian religious magic. But at a certain point the Egyptian magicians aren't able to do what the Lord can. "*Aaron stretched out his hand with his rod and struck the dust of the earth, and there came gnats on man and beast; all the dust of the earth became gnats throughout all the land of Egypt. The magicians tried their secret arts to bring forth gnats but they could not!*" Egypt had no power to control in the face of the Lord's liberating power.

A political system of control and oppression lost control. The claim to be in control was revealed as a fraud. Egypt's supposed power couldn't do what it had claimed to do—keep people under control and compelled to do what the power holders wanted. In the face of God, they could not continue to maintain the system they had set up and were forced to set those they had oppressed free. It was only a matter of time until their soldiers lay dead on the seashore.

God shatters all power and all structures that block the accomplishment of the Divine Plan of salvation. That is the lesson of the exodus narrative. It is a challenge to our faith. Do we believe that God's call to us to accept freedom at Jesus' hands will come true? Do we believe that we, as we respond to God's call, will find that the human powers and structures, especially the political systems that support injustice and oppression, will be unable to carry out their purposes? Do we believe in God's triumph? If Lent is to be a personal and communal exodus into a new freedom we must believe all this. There is no humanly constructed way to a good life, and especially to a life of freedom.

THE UNSUSPECTED POWER OF HUMILITY

A reflection taken from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

O happy the humility of those who repent! O blessed the hope of those who confess! How mighty you are if you are with the Almighty! How quickly the dread judge is revealed as a devoted Father. Think of the prodigal son. By merely intending to humble himself he obtained a pardon that some seek with tears and strive for by confession.

Scripture proclaims: “*I will confess my transgression to the Lord and you forgive the guilt of my sin*”! Everywhere mercy triumphs. It preceded the very will to confess by inspiring it and then preceded the words of confession by forgiving all. When the prodigal was far off the Father ran to meet him. The Father was more anxious to pardon than the son was to be pardoned.

Where sin abounded, grace abounded more. Not only is their forgiveness but the sinner is given the sanctification of the Spirit—the “best robe”. The Father breathed himself into the sinner’s heart that the two might become one spirit. God couldn’t bind us more closely, couldn’t make us more intimate with Him, than by incorporating us into himself. By charity and by ineffable power God unites us with himself. If such is the grace accorded to the repentant what will be the glory of those who reign with Jesus? God gives us so much while we are still on the way, so what treasures is he keeping in store for us in the Kingdom?

You blessed sinner—blessed not because a sinner but because of repentance! The human heart is too narrow. The love it experiences must be expressed in groans, sighs and tears. When you consider all this what comes to birth in your mind and heart? An inexpressible fire of love blazes up. It comes of shame and sorrow and of joy and love all together. O happy sinner, keep carefully and watchfully this spirit. Keep the humility that brought you to your God. There is no greater gift of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing more health-restoring among the sacraments. Keep the humility by which you planned to say, “Father, I am not worthy!” This justifies sinners, perfects the just and brings justice to fullness.

Mercy has welcomed you with kindness, revived you with love and fear has been taken away. Hold fast to humility! You have chosen to be of little account and so you have been advanced beyond your imaginings. Always take the last place, or at least desire to. Humility is the greatest of all virtues, although it doesn’t look upon itself as a virtue. It is the root and seed-bed, the tinder and incentive of all love. From it begin discipline and loving service of others. From it all other virtues begin and through it they make progress and in it they are perfected and preserved. It is humility that makes all the virtues what they are, and if any are lacking it is humility that compensates. In it you find salvation and love and joy beyond your dreams. Rejoice in the lowliness of your service because it exalts you without your becoming exalted. If you cling to it you have the most marvelous of God’s gift, saving only the gift of God’s very self.