

THE FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

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WHAT BRINGS US TO DEEPER FAITH?

A reflection by St. Peter Chrysologus

The two sisters of Lazarus “*sent a message to Jesus saying, Lord, the friend whom you love is sick*”. These words contain an appeal to Jesus’ love and friendship. They implicitly ask him to come and heal Lazarus because of that friendship and Jesus’ special relation with the family. But for Christ it was more important to conquer death than to prevent it by curing disease. He showed his love for his friend not by healing him but by calling him back from death and from the grave. Instead of a curing an illness he gave the glory of rising from the dead.

We are told that when Jesus heard Lazarus was sick he remained where he was for two days. He gives full scope to death and grants free reign to the grave. He allows corruption to set in. He doesn’t forbid the rotting of the body nor the stench that goes with it. These things take their normal course. The realm of darkness is allowed to seize hold of his friend, drag him down to the underworld, and take thorough possession of him. Why does Jesus act in this way?

Christ allows all human hope to be lost. Human despair becomes as deep as is possible. The deed Jesus is about to accomplish will clearly be seen as the work of God. It is not a human work. He waited for Lazarus to die, staying in the same place until he could tell his disciples of the death. Only then did he announce his intention to go to Lazarus. “*Lazarus is dead!*”, he said, and added, “*I am glad.*” How can this be a sign of love for a friend? In fact, Christ was glad because their sorrow over the death of Lazarus was soon to be changed into joy at his restoration to life. “*I am glad for your sake*”, is what he said. Listen to his words: “*I am glad for your sake not to have been there, because now you will believe*”. It was necessary that Lazarus should die so that the faith of many, starting with the disciples, might itself rise up and no longer lie dead. At Jesus’ word Lazarus comes forth from the tomb. It is as though death itself were face to face with its conqueror. Lazarus has returned from the underworld and stands there before all.

Before we can fathom the meaning behind this miracle, we have to consider the way in which the Lord raised Lazarus. It is the greatest of all his signs. Our Lord had raised the daughter of Jairus, but although he restored life to a dead girl she had only just died. He also raised the son of a widow at Naim; he halted the bier, forestalled the burial, and stopped physical decay. But this young man hadn’t fallen totally into death’s power. The case of Lazarus is unique. Death had exerted its full power over him. He had lain in the grave for four days before he was recalled. We see what resurrection will mean in all clarity. We see without any doubt that Jesus is the Lord of life. We see ourselves in the person of Lazarus. We see our hope realized. We need to grow in faith, even as Jesus’ first disciples did. There is nothing that death can bring about that will prevent Jesus from bringing us to live with him always. Do you believe more deeply now?

WHAT IS FAITH LIKE WHEN IT IS MATURE?

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

Even before Jesus was born, Joseph was a believer and mature in faith. The events surrounding the conception and birth of Jesus reveal how differently he behaved and struggled when he had to move toward a greater knowledge of God and a deeper faith in and God's will, for him and for us. The Gospel uses two key words to help us understand: "Her husband Joseph, being a man of honor and wanting to spare her publicly, decided to divorce her informally".

The exegetes have devoted much time to the meaning of this statement, since the text and its translations are not so clear as they might be. For our purposes, it is enough to say that even persons of honor, or in New Testament language, believers who are mature in faith and act out of charity) find themselves caught in anxious and difficult situations.

It seems, first, that Joseph's integrity led him to want to withhold his own name from a baby whose father he did not know. This was a matter of legal honor; Joseph can't give his name to a child that isn't his own. But, second, Joseph's integrity also insists on Mary's virtue, and so he refused to expose to the rigor of the Law a mystery he did not understand; this is goodness. Naturally, this conflict of conscience caused him pain and distress. Joseph was well aware of the Law but at that moment his mature faith and charity overcome it. He chooses the person, Mary, rather than the Law.

Can you think of how often Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their way of interpreting the Law? It was a form of hardness of heart. He doesn't criticize their attachment to the Law but their approach to justice; it lacked charity. Joseph, however, had struggled to reach a balance. He wasn't exempt from anxiety but took upon himself the decision to do the honorable thing, as he saw the matter. It was the fruit of charity. It was the fruit of his maturity in faith.

Joseph was open to the power of Divine grace and its illumination. An angel of the Lord came to resolve the situation in the end. Joseph had been afraid he wouldn't be faithful to God and the angel tells him not to fear. Then he reveals the deeper meaning of the event that so puzzled Joseph. He was probably filled with pure joy.

The figure of Joseph allows us to grasp a fundamental teaching. We need to have a hope that is patient, that can wait—as Joseph did. We need a hope that knows how to suffer through difficult situations with a humble spirit. We need a hope that is sure God will answer our genuine need. That is trusting faith. That is mature faith.

FAITH AND HOPE ARE INSEPARABLE

A reflection from Spiritual Writings by Jules Cardinal Saliege

Two days after he received the message telling him that his friend Lazarus was sick Jesus says to his disciples, "*Lazarus is dead. For your sakes I am glad I was not there. In any event, let's go to him*". Trust in Him, faith in Him; this is what the Master constantly demands of us all. God's Providence arranges the right circumstances to make this spring up and grow in us.

Today our Master calls us to have confidence even when our prayers seem not to be heard. It isn't that they fail to fall on the heart of Jesus. If some disaster results from their not being heard, the reason is not that Jesus doesn't see our tears. Our Master follows all the progress of good, and evil, within us, and nothing can obstruct his gaze or distract him. If he doesn't come at the time we expected, and thought necessary, it is because his hour hasn't yet come! He knows when to come so as to lead us to grow and to God.

Alerted to the approach of Jesus, Martha, despite her sorrow, comes to meet him. At sight of him she can only cry out: "Lord, if you had been here this wouldn't have happened!" The regret she expresses is also an act of trusting confidence in him. She is certain that he wouldn't have let her brother die had he come in time. Notice what she adds: "*Even now, I am sure that God will give you whatever you ask of Him*". Her faith remains. She doesn't doubt. Not the slightest hesitation is apparent. Her faith seems entire, absolute, without reservation. But her faith seems not to have flowered in full hope. She hasn't grasped the full richness of the heart of Jesus or reached the limits of what she can hope his almighty power will do in the service of goodness and to reveal all that God has in store for us. Her hope has to become richer and broader and all-embracing. Without ceasing to be her humble self she has to envisage the miraculous and the impossible.

Jesus says, "*Your brother will rise again!*" Yes, she knows and hopes that because she believes in resurrection. But Jesus wants to make her hope, and ours, burst out and radiate the full confidence it hides from us so far. "*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though dead, shall come to life. Whoever is alive and believes in me will never die*". Jesus asks Martha, and each of us: "*Do you believe this?*"

We have to believe and hope personally, in the very presence—and even the experience—of death. Why isn't it enough to believe in the resurrection on the Last Day? It is not enough because the Messiah brings life now. It is not enough because we have to hope for right now and not just for some distant day that never seems to come. This is God's love, and the love of our Savior. The flame of this love must spread over the whole world, now. Yes, Lord, I believe. The Kingdom of God is here. We are to live it now, even though face to face with death and all the deadly things that happen daily. If you believe you hope and if you hope you act out of that hope as a present reality.

HOW FAITH FINDS WISDOM

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

We have all heard the admonition, “*Seek wisdom while it may be found; call upon it while it is near*”. How near is it? “*The word is near, even in your mouth and in your heart*”. We seek wisdom in our hearts, even if it is already there, and we seek that wisdom which is from faith. Indeed, sober wisdom is found in repentance for past sin, in contempt for present comforts and in the hope for future rewards. If you have lamented your sins you have found wisdom and if you understand that they must be avoided in every way, and present comforts must be spurned and eternal blessedness ought with all one’s desire as the perfect good, then you have found wisdom.

Do you live in the warmth of the love which gives birth to a real hunger for the divine promises? Blessed is the person who finds this wisdom. Even more blessed is the person who remains in this wisdom. Perhaps it is an overflowing abundance that the wise speak of which this hunger causes. To be sure, wisdom overflows in prudence and that in three ways. First, when we confess our own iniquity in our own words we are acting wisely. Second, when we offer thanksgiving and praise. Third when we speak words that build others up. We confess and we magnify the Lord and in doing these two things we build one another up.

Shouldn’t wisdom overflow in what we do? Most certainly. So, in all you do seek the triple overflow of wisdom. The Book of Proverbs describes wisdom in just this way. Wisdom is like a treasure hidden in a field. This world is the field. How are we to find the treasure God has hidden in it? The first step, the prophet Isaiah says, is to seek to be converted. The second is to realize that it will not be found in my own will. So, you look to the holy books and to the psalms and you find it is like honey when you read it, but you must eat it in a way that leaves you always hungering for me. Do not try to gorge on wisdom.

What you need is faith. The Lord will lead you gradually to all that you seek, if you follow God’s will and not your own—even in searching for wisdom. I think myself that wisdom pertains to works and that whoever governs conduct with faith, self-control and patience will find what is sought. One must always seek it in obedience, both to Holy Scripture and to one’s human guides. Subdue self-will, humble yourself and cut off seeking after merely fleshly pleasures and distractions. Holy patience cheerfully, and in dedication, puts up with adversity from both the body and the way the world goes. Do not lose heart.

Faith bids us do all this and it is living by faith that leads us to knowledge of wisdom. When we live according to this knowledge than the wisdom faith gives us become a life of virtue that brings us to lasting joy in God’s Kingdom.

PERSEVERING IN THE WAY OF FAITH IN GOD

A reflection taken from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

We have to persevere patiently in the course which faith has set us on and not let ourselves grow faint or discouraged. St Paul urges us: *“Let’s run the race that lies before us”*. Who will give us the example we need? Paul continues, *“Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection”*. Keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus means that we observe his example and follow it. In arts and athletics, the skill of an instructor is impressed on the minds of students as they watch, but then they must practice what they have seen. This is what we have to do if we want to run the race of life well. It is the only way to keep on a straight course towards our goal.

What is implied in these instructions? Surely, they tell us that Christ has given us faith and that we owe its impulses within us to his inspirations. He tells us, as he told his first disciples, *“You didn’t choose me; it was I who chose you.”* If Christ has given our faith its first impetus we can be sure he will direct us to its goal. *“He endured the cross and thought nothing of its shame for the sake of the joy that lay ahead.”* The Gospel records Jesus own statement that the prince of this world was on his way but would find he had no power over Jesus. Jesus, however, had the power to lay down his life for the Heavenly Father. If we are to follow Christ we must bravely endure all the trials we encounter, and for love’s sake as he himself did.

Scripture says that Christ endured the cross thinking not of its pain or shame but of what lay beyond. Christ chose an ignominious death, and he chose it in full freedom. He was not subject to sin and so he did not act because he feared death. His example shows us how to face disgrace bodily and with peace of heart. Let me remind you of the goal that Christ achieved. *“He has taken his seat at the right hand of God.”*

You see the prize that is to be won. St. Paul puts it as follows: *“God has exalted him and given him the name that is above all others, so that at the name of Jesus every knee may bow”*. He is speaking in a human way about something that can’t be expressed in human language. But even if there were no such reward to be won, wouldn’t Christ’s example be enough to persuade us to endure all trials willingly? We are, in fact, told that rewards do lie ahead of us, and that they are no ordinary honors but realities of such greatness that we don’t even know how to describe them.

Whenever, then, we have to suffer some disgrace or pain we have only to think of Christ and remember how many insults and rejections filled his life. He was continually hearing statements that he was mad or possessed by the prince of devils or a deceiver or magician. And these insults came from the very people among whom he went about doing good. He performed miracles for them. He revealed the works of God to them. He has done as much for us. Be of good heart. Marvelous things lie in store.

NEVER BE AFRAID OF LOSING YOUR REWARD

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

Listen to the Gospel: *“Look, we have abandoned everything and followed you”*. If one were going to boast about anything this would be that thing. But we have also heard the words, *“Let one who boast do so in the Lord”*. The point is that we haven't excelled by our own powers but the Lord has done great things in us. He means that we should show how great the Lord is because he has taken someone so small as we are and has made us a great cause that leads others to his Way. It is by our God's great gifts that we may follow the plan which even St. Paul boasted of. If I too want to boast of this I am not acting like a fool but am telling the truth.

What does all this mean? It is not simply that the apostles left all and followed the Lord. It is not simply a physical or worldly matter but something we do from faith. The Treasure God has placed in us earthen vessels is all the brighter because the vessel is so dull and our virtue shines more brightly because our flesh is so weak. When we live in the flesh as though we were angels and live a prophet hope with a mighty help of grace we give God glory. What we must not do is fall and run away.

Satan fell. Many disciples ceased to follow Jesus. What about me? It is so much better to stand firm in the grace in which we already stand than to go anywhere else. Let us do as Isaiah said: Let the heart of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Seek the Lord and his strength; seek God's face always. We long for nothing as much as we long for God and we seek nothing except God. We are to seek him in simplicity of heart.

If there is anything we have to fear it is being double-minded. We are told that the sinner lives a double life. Yet we know that no one person can at the same time serve two masters. We seek true integrity. This integrity is true perfection and true plenitude and it has no love for duplicity. Such persons are hypocrites and where will the hypocrite be when before God's judgment? If people who do what the Lord's commands carelessly have to face accusation, what about those who do it deceitfully? We must flee duplicity. We must at all times beware the “leaven” of the Pharisees.

God is spirit and truth. Those who seek God must do so in spirit and in truth. If we don't want to seek the Lord in vain then we have to seek the Lord in truth, and that means frequently and perseveringly. We must seek nothing else in place of the Lord or alongside the Lord, nor accept any other thing in exchange for serving the Lord. It is easier for Heaven and earth to pass away than it is for one who seeks the Lord in any of those ways to find the Lord. Seek the Lord and then knock; it shall be opened to you. Seek the Lord and you shall obtain what you seek. Be not afraid. You will find what you genuinely and whole-heartedly seek.

JESUS CHRIST FULFILLS PROMISES

A reflection from a sermon by St. John Chrysostom

We need endurance to do God's will. That means we need endurance to obtain what God has promised us. Are we on the very threshold of victory? Are we through with the contests, the imprisonments, afflictions, confiscations and all the rest? In that case we are standing here waiting for our reward. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us, "*In a little while he who is to come will be here; he will not delay*". The Scriptures are used to comfort people and answer their questions about when the Lord will come again. "*The righteous shall live by faith; no one who shrinks back in fear is pleasing.*" This is not only an exhortation but a warning. Another quote comes: "*We are not among those who shrink back and are lost; we have the faith that leads to life.*"

These words, directed to those for whom the Letter to the Hebrews was written, can just as well be used for us. We can get downcast and tempted to lose heart. People find it hard to endure the sight of the wicked flourishing when they aren't having success. Perhaps some of us long for vengeance and want punishment to be inflicted on sinners while they are rewarded for the pains they have born.

Well, I too can assure the listless and negligent that there will be a time for punishment. The Lord certainly will come. The resurrection's consequences are not endlessly far off but in some sense "close at hand". How do I know this? I do not claim to have the knowledge from the prophets. Christ himself foretold things and if these predictions had proven false then we wouldn't need to believe what he foretold about the Last Days coming soon. But all the foretellings have come true. Why should we hesitate in regard to the Last Days?

Christ foretold the fall of Jerusalem. He declared that the city would suffer a defeat unlike any that had happened before. This prediction has been fulfilled. He foretold a time of great distress, which indeed has come. He described how the Gospel would spread abroad like a mustard plant growing from a tiny seed. In the world, he warned us, we would have affliction but should take heart. He said he had overcome the world, meaning that no one would gain the mastery of us, and all this has come true, as we can see. He declared that the "gates of hell" would not prevail against the Church, in spite of persecution, and that no one would extinguish the light of the Gospel.

Thus, experience bears witness to the fulfillment of these prophetic words. So why are we distressed that the words about the Last Day have not yet been fulfilled? What is it that we want? Do we want our pleasures to take precedence over God's plans to bring many more into his Kingdom? When God tells us that we will be rewarded we have no good reason to doubt. I can't tell you when it will happen exactly. What we must do is open ourselves wholly to God's will, no matter what it entails. Scripture tells us that, as God sees things, there is no delay.