

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF THE EASTER SEASON

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BELIEVING IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

A reflection based on a sermon by St. Augustine

Christ rose from the tomb with his wounds. He knew it would be good for his disciples if he retained the wounds. He knew this would help heal the wound in their hearts! What wound am I talking about? It is the wound of disbelief. So, he should show “himself” to them to heal this! What does the word “himself” mean here? It means that he showed himself as Head of the Church, head of the Body of Christ, as St. Paul calls it. Christ foresaw the Church would extend throughout the world, a vision that his disciples couldn’t yet share but he saw more too.

In showing himself to them as Head of the Church he was promising them the Body but listen to his next words: All these things I told you while I was still among you as a mortal among mortals. But now I no longer live among you as I did before. If we are to understand these marvelous words we must reflect on what the Church is, as the community of those who love God more than anything or anyone else, and a community of those who love one another as they love themselves. It is a community of mutual love of a kind never before seen.

After showing himself to them, Christ opened the disciples’ minds to understand the Scriptures. They had to understand it had been decreed by God that the Christ should suffer, both Head and Body, and that Christ should rise from the dead on the Third Day. The disciples had seen him suffer and now, after his resurrection, they saw him standing in front of them alive. What, then, caused their disbelief? Their inability to see the Body that is the Church as God willed it. They had renounced seeking life and joy in all the old ways; they had declared they would cling to God alone. But they didn’t see the mutual love with which God would surround and support them; they saw Christ but not the Church.

Nevertheless, Christ promised the Church to them and called them to preach repentance to every nation on earth for the forgiveness of sins. Only by turning wholly to God do we find the grace to do this, and we do it convincingly only if we love one another as Christ has loved us. Now you who listen to me find yourself in a situation not unlike that of the first disciples. What was invisible to them is visible to you, but all too often the Church isn’t a community of unconditional and total love for one another in God. Seeing Christ’s Risen Body, they needed to see his Mystical Body, while we see his Mystical Body but have to believe in it as risen with Christ.

When we live as Christ’s Body we reveal the Risen Christ. To us is revealed the whole Christ when we truly live as members of this Mystical Body. What we need to see is its completion in mutual support and love. For this we need the grace that enables one to keep on loving God first and unconditionally and then to love one another in that same love. Love as Christ loved and all will believe.

THE GRACE THAT OVERCOMES THE WORLD

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Bernard

Whoever is born of God overcomes the world. That means that God had decided that whoever Christ has made a brother or sister is a child of God and it means that God has predestined all who believe to be conformed to the image of the Son. Whoever deliberately chooses to look to God for all that makes life good and beautiful is acting like a child of God—such a person looks only to God for the inheritance that will bring life's fullness. So those who are born of God overcome the world. They are victorious over temptation because they can't be tempted to think anything other than God and God's way is anything they really want or need. Thus, we understand why our victory over the world is by and in faith. We believe that in God is all one can need and that it is given in Christ.

Whenever you resist temptation, whenever you overcome wickedness, don't credit your own strength. Don't glory in yourself but in the Lord. Paul says that by faith we who are saints overcome kingdoms. Peter says that in faith one resists the world's ways. John says that faith is the victory which overcomes the world. We see in it and in Christ how to resist every temptation to turn away from God, even under the threat of death.

Do we see many who believe in Jesus but are nevertheless entangled in the love of what is merely worldly? Such a person seems neither to be afraid of threats nor attracted by promises. Such a person neither obeys God's commands nor follows the counsels of Christ. Does such a one truly believe that Christ is God's Son? Such faith, if divorced from works, is dead. Without the works of love faith is dead and without faith we are dead to God. If someone isn't truly alive that person can't overcome anything!

A living and victorious faith comes from Christ dwelling in our hearts! Our hearts are the homes of our desires and longings. If all our longing is for God then we can live wholly by faith. That is what it means to say that whoever believes in Christ as the Son of God will overcome the world. Jesus, however, came by water and by blood. We have all received the water but we have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood. We are offered the grace to shed even our blood for God and for God's Christ. The thing to remember is that where your heart is there is your treasure. Remember always that our only treasure is God.

Remember too that Christ has promised to pray for us. We know that the Heavenly Father will receive into the Kingdom whomever the Son receives as a brother or a sister. That is how Christ makes us fellow heirs. There is, then, no doubt that we will receive a share in all that the Father has, because it has been given to Christ and Christ is sharing it with us. Rejoice in your calling and in your election as heirs of God with Christ. Don't be afraid! God never goes back on his promises. Amen!

SINGING YOUR WAY TO SALVATION

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Augustine

“Sing to the Lord a new song! God’s praise is in the assembly of the holy ones!” We are urged to sing a new song to the Lord and it is a song that can be learned only by one who is a new person in Christ. We all know that songs can be sounds of joy. More profoundly, singing for joy is a matter of expressing love. If you want to sing the new song then you have to learn to love the new life you have in Christ. So, if we are to sing that song we need keep the new life in mind.

The first thing to remember is that the new person and the new song and the new covenant all go together. They are inseparable from the Heavenly Kingdom. Those who sing the new song and live the new life belong to the new covenant and their true home is with God.

No one wholly without love. Everyone loves someone or something. Life’s great question is about what to love. The psalms we sing tell us to choose the object of our love carefully. But in love one can’t choose until one is chosen. We learn to love by being loved. The apostle John reminds us that we love God because God first loved us. Isn’t that what Christ shows us? He gave himself out of love for us and so showed us God’s love for us. Christ is for us the teacher and the source of love and shows us who we should love. It is the love of God that has been poured into our hearts, as Paul reminds us. More, this love comes to us through the Holy Spirit and is a gift given to us by God.

See how sure we can be of God’s love for us! Then we must love God with the same love with which God has loved us. And we have been shown what that means. It means we must live in love; i.e., we must love God and one another with all our hearts. As John reminds us, ***“God is love and whoever dwells in love dwells in God and God dwells in that person”***. How could anyone say “God is love” unless that person had experienced God dwelling within through love lived? Love me and you will have me, says the Lord. But we are unable to love God unless we already have God. You can be sure you have God you experience yourself living the self-giving love shown us in Christ.

All you who are listening to me, listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying through me: ***“Sing to the Lord a new song!”*** I can hear you singing. But I can’t hear whether your life contradicts what you sing. We have to sing not only with our voices but with our hearts, and then with our lips and our lives. God’s praise is in the assembly of the holy ones and those are holy who live God’s love as shown to us by Jesus Christ. We are called to be an assembly, a Church, of praise. That means we are called to be an assembly of love. Love God and love one another. Live that and you yourself will be God’s praise. Let your life itself be a song of praise. Live the joy you sing and live it for God and one another. Walk the way to the Kingdom singing. In that Kingdom we will all abide in the joy of salvation!

THE ASSURANCE WE HAVE IN CHRIST

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Bernard

Let those who are familiar with the narrative of God's saving acts for Israel recall how Pharaoh's daughter drew Moses from the water and by saving him saved Israel as well. This reminds us of Christ because like Moses he saves Israel, and, beyond all Moses did, Christ saves our entire race. Clearly, something more than Moses is here and Christ comes not only by water but by blood. The true liberation isn't from worldly slavery and is ours by the blood of Christ. The salvation of Israel reminds us that our salvation is from the futility of every sort of merely worldly dealings intended to bring us safety and joy.

More, Christ is the true Lawgiver and the law he gives is the new commandment to love one another as we have been loved—by our Heavenly Father and by the Only Begotten Son and the Spirit. St. John testifies that as the Lord slept on the cross there was drawn from his side the Church. While Adam slept Eve was taken from his side to be a colleague in the work of caring for creation and preserving the beauty God gave it. The Church too is given us as a help and to show us how to care for ourselves and recover the beauty that is God's image created in us.

In this Paschal season Christ comes to us by water and by blood that he may give us complete assurance of God's saving love. Not only this but there is a greater testimony and it is the Spirit of Truth. The testimony of water, blood and Spirit is true and certain; happy are those who receive it! Think of the water as baptism and the blood as martyrdom and the Spirit as love. It is, we are told, the Spirit that gives life, the life of faith. But the inner life of faith is love. As Paul testifies, without love whatever you have it profits you not at all. Remember that baptism and martyrdom happen once but are experienced daily. Daily sufferings are a kind of martyrdom and shedding of blood. There is a daily baptism in compunction of heart and the gift of tears, and if you don't strive for martyrdom must seek this milder way of shedding their blood, while those who offend repeatedly must seek to be washed by compunction's water.

Why are these things necessary? Listen to St. John: "*Beloved, do not love the world or the things of the world. All that is the world—i.e., the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and world ambition*"—are to be left behind. We need a three-fold defense against the temptations that come from these desires. The flesh is overcome by mortification, the covetousness of the eyes is overcome by compunction, but all ambition and all such desires are overcome by love. The Spirit testifies that even if bodily afflictions cease, even if the fountain of tears dries up, love never ends. Can the Heavenly Father refuse to receive one to whom the Son testifies out of love? And the Spirit won't fail to agree with the Father and the Son. The Father will receive in heaven as children and heirs those whom the Son receives as brothers and sisters. We possess a great testimony that we cannot reject. We are God's children. Rejoice always!

LIVING AS ONE WHO IS DEAD WITH CHRIST

A reflection developed from a homily of St. John Chrysostom

St. Paul asks us a difficult question. *“How can we still live in sin when we have died to sin?”* The answer to this question starts from an account of what dying to sin means. It doesn't mean simply that we have been forbidden to sin and agreed to try not to. It doesn't mean just that we very much want not to sin. It does mean that there is nothing about sin that attracts us anymore. If that's what happened when we are enlightened and believe that's what being dead to sin means. If we are truly dead so far as sin is concerned we will never submit to it again; that would be to do what nothing in us wants to do.

But it is also true that we have to make every sort of effort to continue in being dead to sin. It is possible we might begin to think as we did before we died to sin and that would be to yield to it. Baptism aims to make us dead to sin once and for all. We must remain as unmoved by sin as a dead person is. *“When we were baptized into Christ we were baptized into his death”*; we shared in his death and that means that baptism equals the cross. What the cross and the tomb were for Christ, that is what baptism is for us, although in a different way.

This is why Paul said that we have died *“a death resembling his”*. Christ lived his entire life in complete obedience to the Heavenly Father's will. His death, humanly speaking, brought this obedience to unalterable state. That's what physical death does; once you've died in this way there is no turning back. We can turn back, even though we want not to with all our mind and heart. Christ couldn't and one day we too will die and then there will be no turning back.

For now, Christ is raised from the dead to a new life and Paul tells us that *“we too can lead a new life”*—the life of one who has died and been raised. That is what baptism caused to happen to us. We are no longer interested in sin—once we recognize it as sin—but it is still possible for us to turn back and to mistake something that is sin for something that is not. We are so prone to misunderstandings and wrong judgments.

Because you have been called to become one with Christ your destiny, as Paul hints, is the same as Christ's. That requires that sin be destroyed in you and that starts by destroying its false attractiveness. That means that as soon as you know something would be sinful you no longer are interested in doing it. Why? Because you want only to be one with God and with Jesus Christ. You want to die on the cross and be raised again by God. Once sin has been destroyed in you there is no reason to doubt that death, the lesser evil, will be destroyed in you too. Do you believe what Paul tells you? Do you believe that God has chosen you to be for God what Christ is? Do you want this with all your heart? Then you have begun to see why sin isn't attractive. Sin is always something that will take you away from what your heart wholly desires. Of course, your own might isn't enough. But God gives you grace and God's grace is sufficient for you. Believe this and pray for it night and day.

OUR NEED TO BE CLEANSED IN CHRIST

A reflection excerpted from an Easter sermon by St. Bernard

In medicine a doctor begins by identifying the agent within one that is causing illness and then removes it. This is exactly what Jesus, the doctor of our souls, does. When he came to us he finds us filled with seven evils, as though we were lepers like Naaman the Syrian. He invites us to follow his descent into our state rather as the Prophet Elisha told Naaman to descend into the Jordan and be cleansed. As the root cause of our illness is pride notice how it makes us ill.

We suffer from wanting to take pride in special clothing. We want to be like the rich of this world. Christ descended from the indescribable riches of heaven and choose poverty. Our symptom shows we want to be a part of the empty show of this world. Christ shows himself wrapped in rags in a manger. Are we still too ashamed to stop pursuing worldly things that lead nowhere? Do we want pleasures that lead nowhere? Or do we want to be like Christ?

Then too we suffer from running off at the mouth with complaints about misfortunes and discomforts. Christ, however, was led like a sheep to the slaughter and didn't even open his mouth. And we suffer from the opposite too, boastfulness of speech. We are led to commend and praise ourselves and those like us. Jesus wouldn't allow demons to call him Son of God, though he was.

An even more deadly condition is self-will. We do what we want and say what we want and think what we want and that places us at the center of our inner world. But God is its center and has to be given all glory. We have to seek first of all to please God and do God's will, as Jesus did. Self-will leads us to hide what is within us and withdraw from what is not centered on our supposed well-being. This leads to the illness of taking counsel only with oneself. The more frequently one does this the more likely one is to think that "only I am really sensible". Such persons are unwilling to take advice. Thus, they undermine unity in a community and so its peace. In effect, they swell up with vanity and don't know it. But Christ shows us how to do God's will and only God's will. Not to put God's will first is to fall into the illness of idolatry.

Perhaps you have your own plan for coming to salvation. But how can you imagine yours is better than God's? Jesus worked at home for thirty years and when he heard God calling him he abandoned it all. Are we better than Jesus? What he laid aside was good and in no way sinful. He did the same in the Garden when he asked the Father to free him of the need to die on the cross. But he said: Your will and not my will be done. Are we ready to imitate Christ?

We need to descend from self-exaltation and be cleansed so that we may be raised up with Christ. This is the reason for our mortifications and much prayer. This is the reason for our poverty and humble obedience. This is the reason why we seek to put love of God and love of one another first. In great mercy God grants us these graces. Let us seek in all things to allow our divine doctor to heal and raise us up.

LONGING FOR JOY IN THE LORD

A prayer of St. Anselm from the Proslogion #26

My God and My Lord, my hope and the joy of my heart, tell me whether this joy of which you speak to me through your Son, is that which all will receive in your Kingdom. I have, indeed, found a joy that is full and more than full. When heart and mind and soul, and the whole person, are full of this joy can it be that a joy without measure still remains?

But that joy with which your chosen ones will rejoice is a joy that eye hasn't seen or ear heard of and isn't something that has entered even into the human heart, as of yet. Not yet, then, have I spoken of or conceived, O Lord, how greatly your blessed ones will rejoice. Without doubt they will rejoice in proportion to their love, and they will love in the measure that they know you. How deeply they will know you, Lord, in that day! How fully they will love you! Truly, this cannot yet have entered into the human heart in this present life.

I pray, O God, that you will let me know you, and love you and so rejoice in you. And if I cannot attain joy's fullness in this life then grant that I may make progress day by day, until that joy comes which is indeed joy's fullness. Let my knowledge of you advance even now, and in your Kingdom may it be made full. Let love for you increase and let it be realized in full truth.

Lord, through your Son you command and counsel us to ask for all this. You promise that we shall receive what you lead us to ask for, and you do this so our joy may be full. I ask for this, Lord, exactly as you counsel me through our Wonderful Counselor.

I know I will receive what you promise because you are true. I will receive it because you want my joy to be full. In the meantime, grant that my mind may meditate on this joy. Let my mouth speak of it constantly. Let my heart love it immeasurably. Let my soul hunger for it ceaselessly. Let my flesh thirst for it. Let my whole being long for it more than anything else.

I want to go on praying like this until I actually enter into your joy, O Lord. You are the Three and the One God. Help me always to pray rightly! May you be blessed for ever and ever. Amen.