

THE ELEVENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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IMAGINING THE UNIMAGINABLE

A reflection from a sermon by St. Peter Chrysologus

This Sunday we are told that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed. What can that possibly mean? Are we hoping for something tiny? Can something like that motivate a virgin's long years of self-restraint, can it be the prize for the blood of a martyr? Can this be that mystery which no eye has seen or ear heard and which no human heart has imagined? Here we see a challenge to our faith—we don't know how to think of that which is promised to those who love God with all their heart.

Let's face this challenge by recalling the Scripture passage which tells us that God's weakness is stronger than human strength, and that God's foolishness is wiser than all human wisdom. If we believe this, it shouldn't surprise us that the smallest of all seeds is somehow greater than the entire earth. This means that the Kingdom of God is sown in us, in our minds and hearts, as something needing to grow, and grow in a way that will lift us up with it as high as God's Kingdom. It will enlarge our faculties of mind and heart and will produce a great knowledge and a vast love that will make us burn with longing love and grasp the breadth of God's truth.

We start by remembering that Christ himself is the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ has been sown within us like a mustard seed. He was first sown in the Virgin's womb but he grew up into the Tree of the Cross with branches that now spread over the entire world. When a mustard seed is crushed then its pungency is experienced and it not only flavors and seasons everything with which it is mixed but preserves it. So it was with Christ. So it is to be with us in whom the crushed Christ has been sown. This mustard seed must be crushed in us if we are to experience the power of God's Kingdom, and if we are to spread it throughout the worlds that are our lives.

Christ became all things in order to restore all of us to God's image and to the full sharing in God's life of loving. The man Jesus received the kingdom of God as a mustard seed and sowed it in the garden that is the Church, his Body. It extends over the entire world—tilled by the plow that is the Gospel, protected by the stakes that are sound doctrine and discipline, cleared of every noxious weed by the labors of those sent as evangelists, and lovely with the perennial flowers that are holy lives. This is the paradise of God and we are its gardeners.

A mustard seed is a symbol of hope. God promised a kingdom to the patriarchs. This hope took root and sprang up through the ministry of the prophets. Through the apostles and all who preach the Gospel by word or example it grew great like a plant large enough to house a whole flock of birds; the Church became a tree filling the entire earth. We too must "take the wings of a dove" to fly to this tree and find rest in its branches. There we may dwell securely no matter what tribulations come. From this resting place we show forth foreshadowings of all that is to come into the world here and hereafter. Rest and labor become one reality and bring us both suffering and joy. What imagination can't encompass, a heart at rest in God can embrace in hope. That hope is yours. Rejoice in it.

CAN YOU SEE YOURSELF AS GOD DOES?

A reflection from The Religion of the Plain Man by Fr. Robert Benson

We have heard Christ himself saying, as plainly as words can, that we will be utterly changed because the Kingdom of Heaven has been planted in us as though it were the tiniest of seeds. One thinks of St. Paul, who said again and again that the Church, which each of us is, is the Body of Christ. Right now, in our eyes we are but small children, yet within us is the potential for great things. We, and the seed within us, have to grow in the unity of faith to the fullness of the knowledge and love of God. When we are full grown in Christ what will we be?

Mary could have asked what God had in store for her as she conceived Christ within her womb. Even if she realized she would be mother of the Messiah it would not have occurred to her to think of herself as Mother of God; yet that is what God made her, and the ministry he gave her is as wonderful as the name. She was like a mustard seed and look what God has made her! Is God's power too little to do something just as wonderful in you? Don't you think God intends to do such wonders? Is this for you part of that which eye hasn't seen or ear heard or what you haven't even tried to imagine using the gift of faith?

I am more than any oak tree or mustard plant: I am the very vine of God, brought out of Egypt long ago. A seed fell into me as a ball of fire, the Holy Spirit, and came with the sound of a mighty wind. Unknowing, as in darkness, roots came from that seed and trust downward into my darkness as into catacombs waking what was dead in me to a new life. Yes, my early grapes had to be trodden and crushed as in a winepress and I seemed to be cast hither and thither by criticism and even calumny, by passion and the fury of those who love this world, but I was only being pruned so as to bear more fruit. My God has grasped me by the hand and led me into the light of living in grace. I too am a garden of God and a paradise where he delights to walk.

I have been planted by the river of salvation and watered by the tears and labors of many saints and holy people. The Spirit of God has blown within me more powerfully than any other force. Already I am mystically one with my Beloved. It is his blood that flows in my veins, and he reminds me of this every time I approach his altar to receive him. It is his strength that sustains me, for he is truly the vine and I only one of his branches. I am nothing save in him! And for this reason, I am unconquerable!

I am made the Body of Christ for others, many of whom I do not know. It is for this that God chose me from before time and anointed me for his work and gifted me with all the abilities and opportunities that I find filling my living and doing. Do I imagine that this is the true total of all God intends for me? Let me never forget how much God has done in so many others who had gifts no more extraordinary than mine. Rejoice in the special gift God has given to the world, and to you. It is your very self, transformed by grace.

FAITH'S WORD ABOUT DEATH

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

The Church has always spoken about death. But its words carry with them many shades of meaning. For example, the Book of Wisdom says, "Death was not God's doing.. God created all things to be" (1:13f). Paul, on the other hand, points out "death is the last enemy to be destroyed" (I Cor. 15:21f). Furthermore, Sacred Scripture teaches us that there is such a thing as a "good death". Again, baptism is called a kind of death. Jesus says that his death is necessary by reason of the Father's will. Every day the liturgy uses one of his ways of talking about his death: "This is my body which will be given up for you".

Jesus' word was probably understood only very imperfectly by those sitting with Him when he uttered it. Yet that word was not forgotten but treasured and guarded jealously in the expectation that later days would reveal the fullness of its meaning and its promise. That expectation continues right up to the present. In Eucharist we hope to understand our own death in the light of Jesus word.

Our task as Christian believers is to find a word and a hope which show that death has a meaning. We mustn't rebel against death, as if we were dealing with something that is utterly meaningless, because that would be to refuse a "happy death" such as we Christians seek, and even have a kind of right to.

It is possible to communicate with the dead, but only in God. They know us and, through God, they know the world they have left. Most of all, they know the world's relationship to God and to God's eternal plan. From and with God they know our affairs and our problems and they speak of them to God. That is part of what prayer is in heaven.

Thus, the dead not only know us but are near us. They live outside our universe but through their prayers, with the power of their love, and with the inspiration we receive from their legacies of example, we experience the effects of their intercession. Recall St. Therese of Lisieux: "I want to spend my heaven doing good on earth". That holds for all those who are now with God. In faith, in prayer, and in the Eucharist, we have the means, the places and the settings for a real and loving communication with our dead. We are given this gift by our God because it helps us become more like God as revealed to us in Jesus. It helps us become more like our Blessed Mother and the saints.

This is God's will and plan. The more faith-filled our lives are the closer we are to these dead, and to the life they live and will live forever. Death is but a door to this life. We need time to enter into this truth. A day of remembrance for our dead is just such a time.

TURNING TO GOD IN THE PRAYER OF LOVE

A prayer of St. Anselm of Canterbury

Lord, my heart is before you! I try but I can do nothing by myself. Please do what I cannot. Admit me to the inner chamber of your love. You have told me to ask, to seek, and to knock. You caused me to seek you and now I ask you to cause me to receive you! You gave me the gift of seeking you so now give me the gift of finding you. You teach me to knock and if you don't open the door for me how will your gift find its fulfillment? By your gift I am filled with desire, so now let me have its fulfillment.

I cling to you and pray that I may never cease to love you. Good Lord, do not reject me. I am hungry for your love; refresh me with it and never let me be wholly filled. Take me and possess me entirely. O little person that I am, think of what you owe your Savior! Think what God has done for you, has been for you and that everything he does and is makes God more loveable in the eyes of your heart. You were in darkness, on uncertain ground, descending into chaos as into hell. A huge leaden weight hung around your neck and dragged you downwards. You were without help and you didn't know it.

Good Lord Jesus, that was my situation and you, like the sun, gave me light. You showed me what a state I was in and then you cast away that weight that was dragging me down and drove off those who attacked me. You called me by a new name that reminds me always of your name. Take courage, you said. I have given my life for you. You will leave the evil you were in and not fall into the pit—if only you will cling to me! I am leading you into my kingdom and I declare you one of my heirs.

Lord, that's the way it was. But you have done so much. I was in darkness, not knowing myself and weak and liable to fall. You illumined my way, showed me who I am and cast all my oppressors behind my back. You made me a Christian and so called me by your own Son's name. You led me to confess you and set me upright and gave me knowledge and love for you. You have made me sure of my salvation in telling me that you gave your own life for me and have promised me glory if only I will keep following you. If I wandered away into sin you simply waited for me to turn and follow you.

How much my whole being owes to you, O Lord. You made me new, you redeemed me, you promised me the most wonderful things, and then you promised your Self. For each of these gifts I want to love you with all my heart. You are greater than I am and what I owe you is as great as you are! I can never repay you and you don't ask me to.

Draw me to you constantly, Lord. I am wholly yours by creation and redemption and I ask that you make me all yours in love. There is no greater gift you can give me than that of loving you with all my heart and soul and strength. Possess me wholly! Grant that I may praise and thank you forever!

CELEBRATING CHRISTIAN MATURITY

A reflection by St. Pope John XXIII

It is supernatural life, nourished with the wonderful means to holiness at our disposal, that gives one clear ideas, strong convictions and generous energies. Because it is a supernatural life it can mature us even before we attain ordinary human maturity. That is one of the gifts we celebrate as we remember St. Aloysius Gonzaga. It isn't necessary to describe the delicacy of feeling, the gracious manner, the ripeness of judgment, or the clarity and vigor of mind that came to him from God. And all this came to its harvest not in the ways expected but through his providing the humblest of services to the neediest of people.

This sort of life and maturity are the active fulfillments of the petitions of the Our Father. You know how important meditation on the prayer of Jesus is. The Holy Name of God was the light of Jesus' life; it was the font of his love for all of us. God's Kingdom, extended constantly and enlarged to encompass more and more peoples, is an outpouring of love and joyful enthusiasm for anyone who genuinely knows Jesus.

A superficial observer of the modern world might think that everywhere the absurd and the crazy and the anti-Christian are in the ascendant. But believers have responded with a greater quest for unity with Christ and with one another and have come to grasp the centrality of charity for their living. This strengthens the communion of faith and is a marvelous fruit of supernatural graces.

A Christian is above all a person of faith, prayer, grace and the conviction that fidelity to one's baptismal commitments is the truest foundation for building a better world. Christians are perhaps the only people who know that such a world is really attainable. What will bring it about? The flowering of the sorts of virtues we see in Aloysius Gonzaga.

His name is resplendent in the light which makes every Christian a dedicated worker in the good cause of the Gospel and the Body of Christ. God's Kingdom is the purpose of every apostolic and humanizing endeavor. We have all received from Our Lord a mandate to act and we cannot refuse it. Guard your hearts from the sort of anxious care that drives those who have no faith to despair. Our task is the search for "the one things that is needful".

So let us remember especially the everyday problems of ordinary people, problems whose solutions have been sought in vain by so many nations and their leaders. It is the Lord who enlightens minds and inspires hearts and strengthens wills so that we can accept and carry out our responsibilities of love for God and one another. Let us seek to live in good will, in working to establish friendly relations among those who have been at enmity, and by giving an example of unconditional loyalty to the good of all who live in our world. It is our faith that will always prove to be the secret of success. It is through this faith that we become mature contributors to building up God's Kingdom of love.

THE ONE THING NEEDED

A reflection from a conference by John Tauler

God is ready to give, we only have to ask properly. What is more, God has been at pains to tell us how to ask properly. First, we should observe what we must ask for and then how to do it. The answer is simple; we must ask wholeheartedly. The thing is to bring our hearts home, so to speak. This means calling them back from wanderings among created things, from distractions. Then, with deep humility, we must place ourselves at God's feet and ask him to be merciful and generous with us.

What we must do is knock at our Heavenly Father's heart and ask for bread. The bread we truly need is simply love for God. If one has none of this bread then one doesn't really have an appetite for any other food God can give us. However rich any other food might be we can't enjoy it or find it nourishing if we don't long to love God. That's the way this love is. It is the one thing we truly and really need.

So let's ask God to give us this love. Let us ask God to use our prayer to teach us this love. Let's use our spiritual exercises to stimulate this love. Asking humbly is the most pleasing way of asking God for this gift. It is also the most helpful thing for us.

Whatever method of prayer a person uses is not important compared with praying to love God with all our heart. You can pray to God as divine or as Trinity or you can pray to the Passion or to the sacred wounds of the Lord. The only essential thing is to pray to love God wholly and always.

It is not given to everyone to use purely mental prayer. Some of us have to use words. If you need to do this don't be concerned. Speak to our dear Lord as lovingly and tenderly as you can. Use all the most loving words you can think of. Doing this raises up your heart, and so your love.

It is very helpful to ask the Heavenly Father to give you a foretaste of himself. Ask this in whatever form of prayer that may suit you. What you are asking is most pleasing to our Heavenly Father. It is very helpful to ask this through the Beloved Son. This way of praying is most pleasing to God.

Do not be concerned if your past sins or faults come to your mind when you set out to pray. What is important is that you persevere in prayer and that you make what you pray your own. When you find that you are really putting your heart into asking that God lead you to love him then you are already making progress.

You now know the one thing that is needful. You now know what way of praying is most pleasing to God. When you persevere in prayer you quickly discover which way of praying best suits you. Knowing this makes it easier to persevere. God tells us to knock and that if we do we will find the door opened for us. Knocking with zeal and perseverance is a kind of prize given to those who refuse to give up. We don't really know in detail all that we need. Let God show you what you need as he leads you more and more into prayer. Doing these things can lead you nowhere except to God. What else is needed?

LEARNING NEVER TO GIVE UP ON ANYONE

A reflection from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Of all the human weaknesses that God has born for us I think the greatest was also the first in time—it was that God lay concealed in the Virgin's womb for nine months. A majesty that knows no bounds was so deeply humble as remain silent and hidden like this for such a long time. Divine Wisdom says nothing and Divine Power works nothing and these realities' presence is not betrayed by any visible sign. God was not seen in such weakness even on the Cross. There what seemed weak was seen to be strong beyond imagining when he blessed with paradise the thief dying with him and when he last breath drew a centurion to confess him as Son of God. But in the womb, it is as if he did not exist. The Eternal Word constrained itself to be utterly silent. To us who have faith the silence of the Word cries out. It calls us too to take up the discipline of silence. This nourishes, forms and strengthens the human spirit in a marvelous inner growth which is the more wholesome for being more hidden. If this were not true Solomon would not have said: "Like an open city without any encompassing walls, so is the person who can't restrain the tongue from speaking".

Consider now the meal in which we are partaking. We are to eat the one who is the Bread of Life, the Bread which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Every word which comes forth from the mouth of God is the Bread of Life, the Only-Begotten Son. And he comes forth from a virgin's womb, from one silence into the silence of a loving heart which receives him wholly and willingly. If you are wise your occupation will be to eat this bread in the presence of the Lord God, preserving like Mary all you hear from or about God and pondering it in your heart. We have been made members of Christ's Body and, precisely as that Body, we eat Christ's Body as the Bread of our lives. Grace is not lessened by use. So the more you eat the more this food will abound for you.

Recall what Scripture tells us about Rebecca when she was carrying both Jacob and Esau in her womb. It is a great lesson which the Word of God gives us as we eat him and ponder on what he has done by giving us the sign of a virgin who conceived. The two children seemed to Rebecca to be struggling in her womb, and she found this very painful. She almost wished that she had not conceived them. Now Mary's womb foreshadows that which is the Church and in this womb too there are the good and well-behaved and the ill-tempered and undisciplined.

All are called into the Body of Christ. Do the ill-disciplined and ill-tempered annoy you so that you wish they had not been brought to term? But God can soften stony hearts to make them the hearts of children of Abraham. God softens the heart of the Church, and your own heart, so that the ache felt is born as long as it takes to re-form the two into one Christ-likeness. Those God has called are never cast away. Never despair of others, or of yourself. God will continue to work until all are beloved children of the Heavenly Father. Do not grow weary of bearing with those who cause you pain. Love them as our Heavenly Father and pray that God, and Mary mother of all who are in Christ, will lead them to the joy of God's heavenly banquet. Pray and love and trust in God, always.