

TWENTY-THIRD WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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WHAT WORDS ARE WE TO SPEAK TO OTHERS?

A reflection based on a sermon by Fr. Lawrence of Brindisi

Jesus, for unknown reasons, avoided Jewish Galilee and went into Gentile territory. Even there he was known and people brought the sick to him. Everyone was astounded by his power to heal. Mark's Gospel tells us "they were beside themselves". The only reaction they could think of is preserved in words that we too should speak whenever we think of all our Savior has done for us: "He has done everything well!" Genesis says that God completed the creation and "saw all that he had made and that it was very good". What could we expect? "A good tree bears good fruit; no good tree can bear bad fruit!" It is clear that we must unite ourselves wholeheartedly with the throng of Gentile in saying, "*He had done all things well; He has made the deaf hear and the dumb speak*". Of course, we also know that Jesus is divine as well as human. We more or less expect him to do things that only God can do. But that isn't an adequate response to Jesus or his works. He doesn't want only our praise but wants us to tell others about him in a way that will open not only their eyes but their hearts to his word and his love.

Doing a good deed is not quite the same thing as doing it well. Many do good deeds but don't do them well; they may help the poor but not (e.g.) in a respectful or loving way. Even a hypocrite may do good deeds, but for the wrong reasons. Yet everything that God does is not only good but done well. "*The Lord is just in all his ways and holy in all his deeds; with wisdom you have done them all, O Lord!*" These confessions of praise call to us to imitate Jesus.

God did all this for our sake and out of love for us. He has done it in order to show us how we are to help one another. In Jesus, God's self-giving is like that of good spouse giving themselves to one another. We are to be good spouses not only to God but for one another. Again, Jesus is our good shepherd, but a shepherd can't make the same gift of self to sheep as one spouse can to the other. The gift can't be as complete or made with the love and tenderness.

We aren't to care for one another as though we were caring for sheep, or even for very dear children. We are to treat one another as equals in dignity and worthy of equal respect and care. We are to love even as God has shown us in Jesus how to love another. The metaphor of spousal self-giving is intended to show us how much we have to be grateful for, and how deeply we are loved and treasured. Scripture says God does this so that we might "know him". God wants us to experience his love just as one spouse experiences the other's love, and even more fully.

We aren't called to "do for one another" in a distant or cold way but in the closest and warmest way imaginable. This is part of striving to do supremely well all the good things we do for one another. God wants to say to each of us, "*You have done all things well!*" Come, then, spouse of God, enter into the joy of your lover and Lord. It is from that joy that we must strive to speak to others. How else can they truly "know" the Lord Jesus? The better you can see Jesus in others, and love him as He is in them, the more you will do all your deeds of love well, even very well.

THE CALL TO BECOME LIVING SIGNS

Based on a commentary on Sunday's Gospel by Fr. Pius Parsch

“Jesus left Tyrian territory and returned to Israel by way of Sidon and the sea of Galilee, entering the district of the Ten Cities. Some people brought him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay hands upon him.”

(Mark 7:1f) Christ is in Gentile territory and a deaf man with a speech impediment is brought to him. He doesn't heal the man by a word, as he had healed many, but he uses a series of sign. He takes the man aside, sticks his fingers into his ears, spits on his hand and spread the spittle on the man's tongue, he looks up to Heaven and groans, and finally says: *Be opened!* Why did Christ do all this? It has been suggested that because the person was deaf Christ communicated with him by a kind of sign language. This may be the case, but I think it is not the whole explanation.

Throughout the Gospels Jesus not only took particular persons aside and did the sort of things described but he took us with them. He touches our ears and our tongues too, and he groans over us as well and says to us: *Be opened.* How did the man in the story use his newfound hearing and ability to speak clearly? He used it to praise God. He used it to tell others how wonderfully God had loved and saved him. He used these abilities to point to Jesus and, in effect, tell others to take their troubles and ills to Jesus. We have had such abilities for a long time. In a sense, every time we pray or worship together we proclaim the goodness of the One who gave us these gifts.

Don't you want to hear God's word as clearly as possible? Don't you want to praise God and repeat what you have heard him say to you as clearly and attractively as may be? In Mark's Gospel a special emphasis is given to the praise and gratitude of those who are healed by Jesus. He can't stop them from talking about it because their joy won't let them. What about you? Have you never received a gift from God that's worth talking about? I don't ask you if you haven't repeated stories of wonders done for others or by the hands of other believers. I ask you about what you have received and how your gratitude has compelled you to share your own story.

Christ speaks the same words to us. Haven't we, then, experienced Christ's love, God's love, personally? The words weren't “throwaways” but expressions of personal love given as a gift to you. No doubt, you long for so much more. But that doesn't lessen the wonder of the gifts of knowledge and speech and hearing you have received. The Holy Spirit has taken up its dwelling in you, personally. You have put on Christ as a new garment and a new self. In words and deeds and hands Jesus has reached out to you.

Jesus has made you an outward sign of the inward reality of his grace and love. That is what you are! We only have to act out who and what we are! Some people despise their bodies and value only their spirits. But God has taken on a body just like ours and used it to do so many wonders for people, ourselves included. He makes you, body and spirit, the sign of his redeeming grace. Be just that today.

THE CALL TO BE SINGLE HEARTED

A reflection from a text by Fr. Hubert van Zeller

The prophets consistently called people to be single-hearted. That means they constantly preached the need to make love for God the center & organizing principle of the whole of one's life. Amos and Jeremiah and Isaiah have left us some powerful appeals to stop trying to use God to get what we personally want and to begin to let God tell us what will bring us to a genuinely good life. Listen to Amos: *"Woe to you who put your confidence in the temple at Samaria rather than Israel's God."* The people he spoke to thought they could worship their idea of God, symbolized by a bull calf as itself a symbol of the divine source of fertility. They did this in the hope it would give them good crops, prosperity and healthy and numerous families. But they thought their offerings would get them these blessings without a need to treat others justly. They tried to use God for private purposes while doing all sort of injustice, especially toward the poor.

The prophet Amos went to the center of this false belief by telling the chief priest at Bethel exactly where it was leading. His reaction was wholly negative. He wrote to the king at Samaria: *"Amos has rebelled against you; the land can't tolerate his words."* A call to worship only the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, not the Baals—of which the calf of Samaria was one, fell on deaf ears.

"Purity of heart", as Scripture calls it, is putting God alone and as God really is, at the center of one's life. If you don't do this it shows in your prayers and your worship. They all get centered on yourself and what you want rather than on God and what God wants. Here is a Scriptural summary of reactions to this call: *"Let us lie in wait for the just because they are never on our side and are always bad mouthing what we do and calling us names and telling people we are wicked and do evil things. It is a pain even to see such people. Their lives aren't like those of most folk and their ways of living are very different. Let's examine them by inflicting outrages on them and even tortures! Let's see how meek and patient they really are!"* Don't be surprised, says Jesus, when people persecute you as they did the prophets.

No one has found a wholly positive way to tell people they are acting foolishly and that the way they are living is leading them to ruin. However, there is a way of doing this without saying a word. One simply lives total devotion to the One True God, and pays no heed to the calls of the created things people often treat as though they were gods. This is part of what it means to live purity of heart. That is what Jesus lived. He was persecuted like the prophets and you will be too. Are you willing to live as Jesus did, loving the things Jesus loved, and above all loving the Heavenly Father with all you mind and heart and all your deeds? That is what Jesus calls you to do. That is a call to purity of heart—to loving only one thing, the One God.

WHAT IS SALVATION?

A reflection from a text by Fr. Damasus Winzen

The prophets of Israel proclaimed God's love but at the same time stated without equivocation or qualification that rejecting God for the sake of present prosperity wouldn't work. After Solomon's kingdom broke into two opposed kingdoms, the northern one, whose capital was Samaria, sponsored a blending of Israel's worship of the One God with that of the Baals. The prophet Hosea called this religious adultery and pictured the disaster it was going to bring on all concerned. Rather than saving the kingdom it would lead it to destruction, he proclaimed. Worshipping fertility, prosperity and good luck is not a way to a good future! It is actually a worship of what human beings imagined would give them a surer hope, a hope they could really count on, than had God.

But what actually happened was the gradual decay of the Northern Kingdom and its destruction. Ironically, the prophet who proclaimed this most effectively, Hosea, has a name that translates "Salvation". How could one who proclaimed destruction also be a proclamation of salvation? Hosea saw God's love for his people mirrored in his love for his own wife, whose career had been that of a sacred prostitute for Baal worship. Israel had been as unfaithful to its Lord and lover as Hosea's wife. Yet Hosea had to be faithful in loving his wife so he would be a living proclamation of God's unconditional love for the Chosen People. We have to treat others with a love like the love with which God treats those he loves but who are often unfaithful—us.

The prophesy of Hosea represents one of God most important self-revelations. The difference between God and human beings is not a matter of power or having all one needs for a good life; it is a difference in capacity and determination to love unconditionally and unselfishly. This love, God's love for us, will triumph. The triumph is over all forms of "idolatry".

The heart of Idolatry is placing one's deepest hopes in someone or something other than the One True God. If we put our hope in the products of our own creativity and knowledge, as many do even today, then we commit idolatry. In Scriptural language, we worship the works of our own hands by hoping in them rather than God. And the worst aspect of this is that what we worship is only a power we long to have to get exactly what we want. Worshipping this, placing our hope in this, is the route to disaster.

But out of disaster God will lead us back to him and to genuinely caring and unselfish love. As Hosea said it, the valley of desolation will become a door of hope. But now God has given us an even deeper insight into what this means. This hope is named "Jesus". In following Jesus, we enter into God's way of loving, and so into God's salvation. In God alone is our hope. Have we accepted this truth? Do we put our hope in God above and beyond anything and anyone else? Do we realize that this is our task today?

GOD HAS ADOPTED US AS CHILDREN

A reflection from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

In great love our Heavenly Father has “*predestined us to be adopted as children; such was God’s will and pleasure*”. This is what St. Paul tells us. Why did God do this? Because God wants to be praised for what and who God really is. And why should God do this if not to lead us to love more and more in the way God loves? What is more, this is not a longing for praise or service or for the glory we might give God, but for our salvation. For this God made our world.

Imagine a person suffering from a disgusting and infectious disease. Imagine that person is also old, decrepit, hungry, poor and with every sort of problem. What if such a person were suddenly transformed into the healthy and most attractive young person, surpassingly lovely to look at and endowed with not only the bloom of youth but every sort of possession and free from every sort of problem, both within and without. Do you think something like this impossible? But isn’t that exactly what God has done for us spiritually?

There is no one among the angels or archangels or the powers of heaven that has any greater spiritual beauty! Our Lord and Savior has made you and me desirable beyond anything we could have imagined.

Now consider the hurtful things we used to say and do. Consider how filled with grace and beauty we now are. Consider the words we use now to express our gratitude for all we have been given. Could any declaration be more wonderful than that by which the newly baptized renounce the devil and swear allegiance to Christ? Could any speech be more gracious than the declaration of faith we make before baptism? But then how is it that so many have been unfaithful to baptism? This can only fill us with sorrow and lead us to pray with all our heart that those who have fallen away be renewed and restored.

It is in the Beloved of our Heavenly Father that we have redemption and restoration. The wonder is not only that God has given us his only Son, but that God gave this Beloved Son to be killed by his enemies! And out of this God has worked our redemption! See how much our God loves us! God has given what he values above everything else to gain our freedom and give us fullness of life.

That is what we mean when we say we have been reconciled through grace. God has given us so much and given it freely and without regret, and because we are so beloved! St. Paul has much to say about our adoption into God’s own family, about our sanctification and our purity of heart, but then he seems to pass from the heights to the depths and speaks also of suffering.

It isn’t that Paul thinks suffering is of no importance but the reverse. Nothing is more astonishing, or more important, than the fact that God’s blood has been shed for us. As wonderful as our adoption is, even more wonderful is God’s love that didn’t spare an Only Son in order to give us everything God has. We have been reconciled through the blood of our Lord. We have been reconciled simply because we are loved. Can you possibly know more completely how much you are loved personally, and treasured? Every day let our living be an expression of joy and gratitude for the truth our God has shown us.

TO BE SAVED BY THE CROSS IS TO CARRY IT

A reflection from a meditation by Bishop Anthony Bloom

“No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from there—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that all who believe may have eternal life in Him” (Jn 3:13ff). The Lord himself has taken upon his shoulders the first cross, the heaviest and most appalling cross. But after him thousands and thousands of people, even children, have taken their own crosses upon themselves. These crosses, which seem lesser than Christ’s, remain so frightening for those who have to carry them.

Such innumerable crowds have lovingly, obediently, walked in the footsteps of Christ, treading a long tragic way which leads from earth to the very throne of God and into God’s Kingdom. They walk on, following Jesus, crowd after crowd and with innumerable kinds of crosses—some of them fashioned by the sin or malice of fellow Christians. In this way, the disciples of Christ are crucified.

However far we look backwards we see crosses and more crosses, one after the other. We see the bodies of martyrs and other heroes of the spirit, we see monks and nuns, we see priests and pastors, and we see many, many ordinary, simple, humble people of God who have willingly taken upon themselves crosses made by others as well as by themselves. They walk through the centuries knowing Christ foretold the sorrow all share on this earth. Yet the Kingdom of God belongs to them!

They walk with heavy crosses, rejected, hated because of truth, because of the name of Christ. They walk as pure victims—of God and one another. They are old and young, children and grown-ups. And where are you and I? Are we standing and looking, watching this long procession, this throng of people with shining eyes and with hope unquenched and yet with unfaltering love, or are we joining them? They seem to have an unbelievable joy in their hearts as they pass by us, by why?

Isn’t it our turn to join all these and find the answer? Aren’t we to take up our cross and follow Christ and all those who love him? Christ has commanded us to follow him. He is inviting us to the celebration, the party of parties, that is his Kingdom. Is this a nightmare? How can flesh and blood endure what seems a tragedy, and is? We can because Christ is Risen! We don’t see the Christ who walks before us as his tormentors saw him, as a defeated prophet. We know him even now to be in glory. We know his every word and promise is true. We know that the Kingdom of God is ours if we simply follow him. Each day we are given the grace to make that decision.

REMEMBER HOW MARY CARRIED THE CROSS

A reflection taken from homilies by St. Pope John XXIII

The Gospels and the Church and the liturgy teach us to meditate on the sorrows of Mary. We turn, then, to a memory of sadness, an example of patient endurance. We remind ourselves, for our own good, that all of life here below is beset with trials and difficulties. It is a life of hardships but at the end we glimpse an everlasting joy.

Jesus, Mary, Joseph! Give us the certain hope of future triumph. Help us to have courage in every moment of our earthly lives. Jesus, Mary and Joseph each knew sorrow, privations and suffering. Yet each continually reflected the eternal splendor of Heaven and of a life lived with and in God.

The Fathers of the Church warn us that in every age and place there are and will be temptations. If we fail to stay alert and hope in God we may fall victim to some of them. Our longings for various things can wound us. The more wealth one has the more one wants. But using wealth wrongly leads us into wretchedness. The same may be said of the longing for power, even the power to put things right. Then there is a pride which breaks the bonds of love and mutual concern and ignores justice in its search for things like power or wealth.

Mary never forgot the gift she had given to the world, to us. It is our Lord Jesus the Christ. He has taken up our crosses and by that means purifies us, strengthens and transforms our energies and frees us from using them in hurtful ways. God uses these crosses to further our spiritual lives and train us in self-control, and above all in loving like Jesus. Mary lived immersed in Jesus' love, and she tried daily to follow him in that love. It led her, as it leads us, to take up various crosses and follow him.

The lessons we can learn from such wonderful examples as Mary gives us are to be the sources of never failing encouragement and strength. By these means we rise again after every fall. We correct the faults that come to us from our formation as children and young adults. We shape our own temperaments so we want most of all to seek peace without self-seeking and so seeking mutual love like Christ's. We strain forward toward the day and place where such wonders become our daily prayer and thanksgiving.

At the end of life, a door stands open. None can pass through except those who carry a cross. The Lord has kept us company and has shared with us the care of his Blessed Mother, and so many other holy persons. In this company our hope finds good soil, the soil it needs to put down roots and transform us. What challenge need we fear? What can frighten us away from that door at life's end? Those we love most have passed through and stand there with hands outstretched to take ours and guide us these last few steps. We can even now see them and their eyes of love. In trust we walk forward carrying the cross and that is what makes us supremely like Jesus.