

THE THIRD WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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KEEPING OUR EYES FIXED ON THE LORD

A reflection by Origen of Alexandria

“Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit and his reputation spread throughout the countryside; he taught in the synagogues and everyone sang his praises.” When we read about Jesus teaching in the synagogues of Galilee and about the praise everyone heaped upon him, we must be careful not to think of those peoples as privileged in some unique way and of ourselves as deprived. If Scripture tells us the truth, Jesus speaks to us today just as truly as he spoke to synagogue congregations long ago. He is speaking to us, assembled here, and to congregations all across the world and throughout all time. He is asking us to be instruments through which he can continue his teaching.

What we have to do is pray that we may always be fit and ready to sing his praises and repeat his words and deeds. ***“Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. When he stood up to read, they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling it he found the passage where it is written: The Spirit of the Lord has been given me for he has anointed me.”*** This was no coincidence. It was part of the plan of Divine Providence.

God planned that Jesus should unroll the Isaiah scroll and find this passage prophesying about Jesus himself. Do you remember the other Scripture text which reads, ***“not a single sparrow will fall to the ground without your Heavenly Father’s permission”***? Do you recall that the apostles were told that every hair on their heads had been counted? Remembering such texts, we can be sure it was not by chance that the Isaiah scroll was produced rather than some other or that this precise passage was found. Nor is it by chance that we hear these words.

We too can say ***“the Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me”***. When Jesus proclaimed this message ***“every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him”***. At this very moment he wants us to fix our eyes upon him too. Whenever we direct our inward gaze upon our Savior, we fix them on wisdom and truth in contemplation of God’s only Son. Blessed the assembly of which it can be said ***“all eyes are fixed upon him”***. For all of us to have our eyes fixed on Jesus—and not just the eyes of our bodies but of our inner selves—is to reflect the radiance that streams from him, as at his Transfiguration.

How do we reflect Jesus? We do it when the beauty and wonder of love fills our hearts and streams forth in our deeds of care for one another. This is how we should understand that other Scripture text: ***“The light of your face has shed its brightness upon us, O Lord”***. We see that on the Cross and in the Resurrection, and we see it in our congregation and in each of our brothers and sisters—if we all keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and our ears and hearts fully open to his work. What the Spirit places within us is meant to shine forth. Let us love one another, and all God’s children, as Jesus loves us and them and fulfill God’s intention.

WE MUST WORSHIP ONLY THE ONE TRUE GOD

A reflection developed from a discourse by St. Thomas Aquinas

The first commandment has to do with loving the One True God: “*You shall not have strange gods in my presence*”. Scripture tells us some of the many reasons why people have worshipped something or someone other than the One God. For instance, some have thought demons more important or helpful than the True God. Some have worshipped the sun and the moon, mistaken for divine beings. In other words, people are deceived about who God is. Some imagine that natural things are the sources of life and goodness and so, in effect, worship them. Some have worshipped the dead or their ancestors and some have worshipped powerful living, though no salvation is from them. Some others have treated themselves, or things like pleasures, as though they were the sources of goodness. None of these should be worshipped as the True God is worshipped.

Scripture gives us a number of reasons why our worship should all be directed to the True God. The first is that one should reverence anything only according to its genuine dignity. We must not “*exchange the glory of the incorruptible God for the image of a corruptible thing*”, as the Letter to the Romans tells us. Everything else is passing and won’t always be there for us. The One God alone is omniscient and so knows all and cares for all. That is essential to God’s dignity as supreme. “*All things are open and naked in is sight*”, as the Letter to the Hebrews says.

We should worship God because it is from God that we receive everything good. God is the maker of all things. God fills all things with goodness. We would be very ungrateful indeed if we did not appreciate what has been given us. To look to anyone else would be to treat them as gods and so do exactly what we are forbidden to do. We have to put all our trust in God. “*Blessed is the one whose hope is in the name of the Lord*”. St. Paul asks, “*Now that you have known God ... how can you turn to what is weak and needy?*”

Yet again, remember that we have made a solemn promise to worship only the True God. We have renounced the devil and promised fidelity to God alone. This is a promise we must not break! “*One who breaks the Law of Moses can be put to death on the evidence of two or three witnesses, so how much more does one who treads under foot the Son of God deserve punishment!*” We have made a choice and must not try to undo it.

It is a terrible burden to try and find a good life by serving the devil and doing evil. The prophet Jeremiah reminded his contemporaries that if they chose other gods, they would have to work at serving them day and night and get nothing from it anyway. That is one reason why one who sins has to sin again; sin never gives us a good life but keeps us seeking it in vain. Jesus, on the other hand, tells us that his burden is light and his yoke pleasant to bear. You have entrusted yourself to Jesus. Don’t turn back. Think of the greatness of the reward promised us for serving God. There is no law that brings with it such promises. In Matthew’s Gospel we are told that “*we shall be as the angels of God in heaven*”. Think of St. Peter’s question: “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!*”

THE DANGER OF FORGETFULNESS

A reflection developed from a text by Bishop Alban Goodier

The Gospel of Sunday tells us that Jesus read a passage from Isaiah and interpreted it as applying to him. *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to heal the contrite of heart”*. Jesus did this in a calm and self-possessed way, and his manner held everyone present transfixed with their eyes on him. He spoke with the authority of a master and winningly as one who is giving a gift, and his words rang out clearly: *“This day this scripture is being fulfilled in your hearing!”* He had selected one of the tenderest and most hope-filled of Isaiah’s prophecies about the Messiah.

Jesus used this text to speak of meekness and of a contrite heart. He spoke as to captives who knew he was speaking to them. He spoke as one who had lived with them in bondage and knew the weight of the chains they bore. He spoke as one who understood them sympathetically, who knew how hard it would be for them to bend but was encouraging them to throw off despair, because if they looked up, they would glimpse a new horizon and find their strength restored. He spoke of a future of bright things. Gracefully, without their realizing it he drew them and they followed him without reflecting, silent and under the spell of his attraction and invitation.

Jesus told that congregation he had come to lead them and heal them and set them free. He was to give them news about all their hearts desired and that they need only reach out and take hold of it. He had begun to cast his spell about them and all they needed to do was to yield up themselves and let themselves be won. The eloquence of Jesus rested on crystal sincerity and undoubtable truth and a sympathy that included every human person and heart. He invited them to a new companionship and did it with an authority which needed no argument to support it. He was the truth convincing by his own transparency and binding every person of goodwill within hearing distance.

Then, for a few moments, there was silence. At length, someone moved and the spell was broken. Everyone looked around. Their eyes were filled with enthusiasm. There was admiration and joy and a satisfaction such as can only weep for gladness. Then they began to speak. *“And all gave testimony to him, and they were amazed at the words of grace that he spoke”*. But they couldn’t remain like this. They were feeling a freshness and a newness that didn’t last.

We may have felt that way when Jesus spoke to us. Our first impulse was one of admiration and even surrender. But then we looked at one another and all the old way with their old tones and emotions. We, like the people in that ancient synagogue, began to doubt that it could all be true for us. Jesus had spoken so beautifully. But we had memories that easily overshadowed that beauty. We heard, or thought up for ourselves, many reasons to doubt or to criticize. Very soon we found that we were able, perhaps without even realizing it, to begin to doubt and to hesitate, and to forget the spell we were under while we listened to Jesus. We are invited today to listen to him again. Perhaps in prayer we will hear his call again, and allow ourselves to respond to it fully and with our whole heart.

GOD COMES TO BETROTH HIMSELF TO US

A reflection developed from a homily by Origen of Alexandria

We have heard the story of Abraham and Isaac and of how Isaac married Rebecca. Recall the facts. Rebecca went to the well every day and drew water. That was the reason Abraham's servant found her and arranged her betrothal to Isaac. Why did the Holy Spirit arrange for us to hear this story? It is because he wants to lead us every day to the well that is Scripture. We are invited, in a way mysteriously like that of Rebecca, to draw from that well a full water jar and to be ready to share it. She gave some of the water she had drawn to Abraham's servant and even to his camels. She could draw so much that she could do this and still take home enough for everyone.

Everything in Scripture has its symbolic meaning as well as its ordinary one. Christ, for instance, wishes to betroth us and that is why a text says: "*I will betroth you to myself for ever, I will betroth you to myself in faithfulness and mercy, and you shall know the Lord!*" Because he wishes to wed you God sends a servant before him. This servant is a prophetic message. All the prophets proclaim a message we must receive before we can be betrothed to Christ.

Perhaps you see an exegetical problem here. If the servant stands for the message of the prophets then how can that servant be given a drink by Rebecca? Shouldn't he rather give her a drink? This is not a real problem. Even the Lord Jesus, though he is the bread of life that feeds the faith of all who are interiorly hungry, admits that he too feels hunger. Recall the text: "*I was hungry and you gave me food*". Again, he calls himself "*the living water*" who gives a drink to all who are thirsty spiritually as well as physically though he is thirsty too.

Jesus asked a Samaritan woman to give him a drink and then offered her living water that would satisfy her forever. Like the Lord himself the prophetic message gives drink to the thirsty but is said to have its own thirst quenched—by drawing many people to turn to the Lord. In another sense, Scripture has its own thirst for listeners; it is satisfied by all those who come to study it.

We can see ourselves and our own thirst, and its satisfaction, using all these symbols and metaphors. We can also see our own calls to share what God has so abundantly poured out for us. We hunger and thirst after the Lord and that draws us to want to share what we have been given with any truly thirsty person the Lord's Providence causes us to meet. We are like Jesus, sitting beside the well in Samarian, we are and aren't able to draw water to satisfy other's thirst, but only by helping another satisfy her thirst. Haven't you noticed that you receive from God only in the measure that you thirst to share God, and all that God has given you. That is our vocation, as it was that of Jesus. We have only to imitate Jesus, to walk with Jesus, to find God and the life of God's Kingdom and eternal wedding banquet.

DRAWING OTHERS TO CHRIST

A reflection from The Secret of John Bosco by H. Gheon

Some think that authority is the only power which can make a good work last. It is a fact, however, that St. John Bosco never tried to use authority in this way. Indeed, his way of drawing people to Christ—and since he spent his life serving young people this was a way of drawing them—was founded entirely upon the cultivation of liberty and free choosing.

Try, with John Bosco, to imagine the mind of a young person. There is no place here for authority or constraint; they don't work. John Bosco ran houses of refuge for street children and he conducted them in a very unregimented way. Each house was a place where choice was, so to speak, cultivated with the objective of helping all the young people he served grow and flourish. He ran schools and in them discipline was at its minimum, while outside the school complete liberty prevailed. That liberty was observed and then subtly directed and gradually shaped.

John Bosco dealt with each young person by taking a personal interest in all that interested the young—family, work, preferences and pleasures. He adopted the stance of a young friend and worked to gain the trust and confidence of all. The goal was to form their sense of what is good and bad and then to draw forth a desire for the good and a horror of what is sin. He worked specially to exemplify a taste for prayer and a sense of God's presence.

He didn't confine prayer or God to a special holy place. Evening prayer (e.g.) actually involved going outside to a playground. It is important to learn to pray everywhere. What's more, he avoided sermons but gave short talks about things that interested everyone and contained concrete illustrations. Evening prayer was to be short—it actually lasted two or three minutes, and was part of being together and playing. Because he was so interested in them it was easy for them to be interested in what interested him. Prayer must be an integral part of everyday activities and part of what all enjoyed!

No one was forced to participate in sacraments but each had to choose to do so freely. Even if someone behaved badly, any punishment must be given so as not to humiliate the person being punished. Ideally, the punishment was just the sadness of their friend, John Bosco. Punishment can only be effective if there is a genuine bond of affection between the young person and their master. If a young person had turned out to be incurably given to bad things then that person had to be expelled from the class and the residence. John Bosco always found a pretext that left the young person's reputation with peers intact.

Not everyone will yield to a method based on genuine care and even affection. John Bosco worked very hard to win the young and then to treat them with genuine respect, even if they didn't respond positively. He asked all those who would work with him to learn how to do this. It seemed to him the only way to draw young people to Christ and to lead them to want to imitate Christ in their own life and all its activities. Loving respect best wins people for Christ.

LEARNING A FEAST DAY'S SYMBOLIC MEANING

A reflection developed from a homily by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

We stand on the eve of our celebration of Blessed Mary's purification and of Jesus being presented to God in the Temple. We are not preparing to celebrate facts of history but to be instructed by the Holy Spirit. For instance, a woman who had given birth was forbidden to enter the Temple for a certain time until she underwent rites of purification. Symbolically this teaches us that one who is newly converted to God, or perhaps to monastic life, still needs to be concerned with inner purification. Such a one must begin with good works and seek to strengthen faith. This is about whether one is able to "*touch holy things*", which symbolically means rightly understanding what one has come to believe about God and a life that leads to God. Faith and good works are the path to holiness and God.

When the Law of Moses says that one who is to be purified must bring the offering of a lamb or a turtledove or two pigeons what does this mean? Obviously, it means that one approaches God through Jesus who is the Lamb of God. But how does one offer this lamb? Note that Scripture tells us God has made this lamb wisdom and justice and sanctification. These, then, are the offerings asked of us. How do we make them? Listen to St. John. "*Just as Christ has laid down his life for us, so we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren*". You can share with others words which lead to Christ and to life and make this your offering of wisdom and the right relation with others called justice.

But what does it mean that Blessed Mary made an offering not of a lamb but of two pigeons? It indicates that the Lamb of God made himself poor and so would have his mother make only the offering of the very poor. Are you poor, or are you making yourself poor like Christ for Christ's sake, that is for the sake of the poor? Jesus, seated in Heaven, tells us that he is also each of the poor ones we meet, and that whatever we share with them we share with Him. Our offering is this sharing, and for monks it is a sharing with their brothers who have become poor in imitation of the poor Christ.

Consider the offering of a turtledove. It is a bird without a gall and lives only in flocks and in the desert. Shouldn't all who live in community live without gall. Whatever they do ought to have the savor of charity and direct attention inwardly. They don't seek to be singular but follow the orderly arrangements of their community. They live in a kind of desert by showing contempt for what is worldly. If we live in these ways, we have learned how to make a purifying offering.

We are now ready to understand holy things and can enter into God's sanctuary. We now know both why we celebrate such feast days as tomorrow's and how we must help one another learn their meaning and carry out the holy lessons it embodies. We don't lose ourselves in the rites but let them lead us into the sanctuary of a holy understanding of God's call to us to live in love of him and of one another.

INVITE JESUS INTO THE TEMPLE YOU ARE

A reflection extracted from a homily by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

We heard in the Gospel reading for the Feast of the Presentation that when Jesus' parents brought him to God's Temple they encountered a very elderly man who had waited all his life for the coming of God's Messiah. He took Jesus into his arms and blessed God from the depths of his heart. Daily we too are given the opportunity to do this—to contemplate Jesus' life and passion and to eat his body and blood and hear his Gospel. When we heard today's Gospel passage, we were told that "*there was in Jerusalem a man whose name with Simeon*". Daily we sing his song of thanksgiving and surrender to God.

What does he teach us? Simeon was a holy man. There was another in Jerusalem, Herod, who wasn't holy because of pride and greed and lack of self-control. But Simeon was holy because he had put away greed and pride and learned to wait upon the Lord's will perfectly. He was a person who truly showed for the image and likeness of God. Are we striving to become like him? If only we knew how to live as images and likenesses of God! This is an interior likeness but it shows itself outwardly in our deeds and manner of life. It tells us that he cared more for the things of God than for anything earthly. This showed his genuine dignity. He cultivated, nourished, and fed that part of himself that is God's image and not that which we share with the beasts.

We are told Simeon was just and feared God. How few of us possess these virtues! We are so often lukewarm and wretched. If we make a little progress, we think ourselves secure and with that comes pride. If we lose fear of the Lord, we easily begin to make light of spiritual labors and abandon them. "*Blessed is the one who is always on guard*", says Proverbs. If we avoid these pitfalls and live as Simeon did then we too can "*wait for the consolation of Israel*" with confidence and peace. We greatly need that One who will spiritually console Israel, the trusting hope of those who never cease to wrestle with all that separates them from God and God's goodness.

We need to devote ourselves to good words. As soon as our head hurts or we are a bit weary we give in to lukewarmness. Whoever has occasionally burned with love of Christ and had some sweet feeling, may sense great security that he will be saved. The Holy Spirit has told him he will not die but see Christ. But when one returns from such experiences one quickly discovers within what is to be feared. St. Paul says, "*I chastise my body lest preaching to others I myself be cast away*". He found in his own weakness reason to fear.

We want Jesus to come to us as to a temple of God and dwell in us always. I hope that you will hold to the way you have begun to practice and prepare the temple in your heart so that Jesus may come in. Open the arms of your heart to embrace Jesus and have them spiritually filled with Our Lord. Help one another do this, even as Blessed Mary and our Lord do. Then you never need to fear anything except ceasing your efforts to let the Lord's image and likeness shine out from you in deeds of love.