

THE THIRD WEEK OF EASTERTIDE

- Sun. **The Third Sunday of Easter**
May 5 **GROWING IN LOVE FOR JESUS**
 A reflection from a sermon by St. Augustine
- Mon. **Monday of the 3rd Week of Easter**
6 **WHAT WE PRAY FOR**
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- Tues. **Tuesday of the 3rd Week of Easter**
7 **OUR LIFE AS A SONG OF PRAISE**
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8 **DYING TO SIN**
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9 **THE SAVING ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN CHRIST**
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GROWING IN LOVE FOR JESUS

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Augustine

“Jesus stepped forward, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish” (Jn.21). The Lord appeared to his disciples in Galilee after his resurrection. Today we hear the story of his questioning of Peter. Three times Peter had denied knowing Jesus, and now Jesus requires of him a three-fold declaration of love. Now that Christ had been raised to unending life, he comes to raise Peter to a new life as well. Notice, moreover, that each time Peter declares his love for Jesus he is told to feed Jesus’ flock; i.e., to care for those whom Christ is calling to be his own as he called Peter.

Is there any advantage for Christ as a result of Peter’s renewed love for him? Isn’t the same thing true in our case? If Christ loves you then you gain a great advantage, but what is the advantage for Christ? Pause and ask yourself how you actually love Christ. He told us how in speaking to Peter: ***“Do you love me? Then feed my sheep”***. He repeats it three times. We can’t miss the importance Jesus gives to loving all he calls to be with him forever. Remember how Jesus describes judgement: Whatever you did, or failed to do, for the least of my brothers and sisters you did or didn’t do for me!

Now wonder the Lord has only one question: Do you love me? Each time we say we do, he responds with the command to feed his sheep. As we love one another so we love Christ! In Christ we encounter the Eternal God who became human in Christ. We knew him first as a true member of our race. As God in human form he did many wonderful signs, and as a human being he suffered much from what other human beings did. Yet however much suffering people inflicted on him, he responded with merciful love. We killed him and he returned from the dead still loving and caring for us. The Risen Christ lived with us for forty days and ascended into Heaven before the eyes of his disciples, leaving the command to proclaim the good news of God’s never-ending love to all.

We believe all these things, even though we never saw them. We believe that we are commanded to love Christ, our Lord, and to obey his command to go to all peoples on earth and proclaim the good news of resurrection and life everlasting. Why is it good news? Because it tells us the Kingdom of God is among us and the love for one another which marks off citizens of that Kingdom is beginning to spread. Listen: ***“If you don’t love the brother or sister that you see, how can you love the God whom you can’t see?”*** We show our love for our shepherd by loving his sheep. The sheep are members of Christ and of Christ’s body as really as the human body he took upon himself was and is really his own.

Recall the words of the Baptist: ***“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!”*** How could a lamb bear such a burden? He shows how strong he is by overcoming death. He has given us the Spirit, through whom that strength came to Him. You have received that Spirit. What reason can you have to be afraid of carrying out your Lord’s command? May nothing be dearer to us than Christ Our Lord! Let us love him with all our hearts! Then all will know they are loved both by God and by all of those who follow Christ. The world is filled with people who love us and seek to care for us.

WHAT WE PRAY FOR

A reflection taken from Morals on Job by St. Gregory the Great

In Revelation we are told that all those who have died for Christ cry out in prayer for the coming of the Last Day and the vindication of their sacrifice. Their loud outcry expresses a tremendous longing. The more insistent a prayer the stronger the desire it expresses. The more insistently we pray, the louder is our voice in the ears of the Infinite Spirit! Longing is the language of the spirit. That's why Scripture talks about God's ears hearing the desires of our hearts.

In human affairs it often happens that one who is asked for something doesn't see matters as does the person making the request. Now God's holy ones in Heaven find their joy in clinging to God in every way and so they don't pray for what they think God doesn't will but for what they know God will—to give them, or to give everyone. This may not sound like “prayer”, as you understand it, but it is perfect prayer.

When one is united to God, one doesn't pray to get something, because one has God has everything! The more perfectly one is united to God the more one prays for what they know God wills. The love God gives them inspires them to pray for what God wants because what God wants is to share himself. The holy ones pray for the water of life that God is already giving them; they drink that water because God makes them crave it in a way we can't yet understand. Their thirst is satisfied by the love that is their prayer and that gives them what they pray for. They pray for the very love shared with all. How could they be united to God if they did anything other than this?

Recall God's response to their prayer. *“Be patient a little longer, until the number of your companions in the Lord's service is complete!”* Their prayer is that all may share the love of God that they know already. They are simply told that their vindication will come in the very realization of God's victorious love. Their cry is the expression of a loving heart's longing, and of God's answer that tells them their longing is being fulfilled as more and more are drawn to God, and more and more sacrifice themselves so that all may know that love personally.

Jesus has told us to carry the Good News to all peoples. That is how we live the love that God is and shares with us. The longing of the martyrs will be fulfilled, as will ours, because we all long for what God is actually bringing about. Even as they, and we, long for the fulfillment of the Kingdom, we see it being fulfilled, as more and more people are drawn to faith and to the love that lives out of faith. How could we do anything but rejoice as we see the number of our brothers and sisters becoming greater? Our longing is for love and is itself love. Our prayer is fulfilled even as we pray because it is fulfilled as we live the love that draws all to God and to God's Christ.

OUR LIFE AS A SONG OF PRAISE

A reflection from a sermon by St. Augustine

“Sing to the Lord a new song! Sing God’s praise in the assembly of the holy ones”. We are called to sing a new song to the Lord. What is this “new song”? It is a song that can be learned only by a “new person”. This new person is created by faith and by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The new song we are to sing is a song of joy! This is because it is a song of love. It can be sung only by a person who has learned to love as Christ loves. That means the song of love we are to sing is the new life we are to live in Christ! We learn to sing it as we learn to live a new life of risen love. The new person, the new song and the new covenant are all aspects of the New Kingdom of God. Those who are new persons, living a new and risen life, sing the new song and belong to the New Covenant and the New Kingdom.

Everyone loves something. But not everyone loves what gives life. The psalms constantly warn us to choose carefully what we will love after we make a choice. But we can only do this if we have been chosen. We couldn’t love until we had been loved—that’s how one learns to love. St. Paul says it: ***“We love him because he first loved us”***. God gave himself to us in Jesus Christ as the object of our love. ***“The love of God has been poured into our hearts”***. St. Paul goes on to say that we are to love as God loves and that this comes ***“through the Holy Spirit who has been given us”***.

We are called to love God with a love God gives us. As St. John tells us: ***“God is love and whoever dwells in love dwells in God and God dwells in that person”***. It isn’t enough to say that love is from God. Scripture teaches us what we wouldn’t dare to say on our own: ***“God is love”***. The only one who can say this is one who has God’s indwelling love. God is crying out to tell us that if we love God, we have God. No one would be able to love God if God didn’t already possess and dwell in that person!

It all comes to is this: We are called to become songs of love for God! We only sing this song when we love one another. Jesus has shown us how in calling us to love as he loves. This love is a joyful thing and when we are loving one another we are to do it in joy. If what we want most is to love God in Jesus, and if loving one another in practical ways is an expression of that love, then when we serve and love one another we have exactly what we want most. Could you want to do something else that took you away from the love of your heart?

Each of us is the fruit of true faith resulting from the holy seed of the Spirit. We have been born in Christ and our life is from above. So, listen to the Spirit: ***“Sing to the Lord a new song!”*** That’s what the Spirit says. Can we hear one another singing? Yes, so long as what we do doesn’t contradict what we claim to be singing. Sing genuine divine love with your voices, your hearts and your lives. That’s how one sings with one’s whole heart! Listen to the choir that is Christ’s body, the church. That song is transforming the world.

DYING TO SIN

A reflection taken from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

“How can we still live in sin when we have died to sin?” When he asks this question, St. Paul is asking us to reflect on what having “died to sin” means practically. It can’t mean simply that we have been forbidden to sin, but if we would understand we have to look carefully at what we really did when we were enlightened and gave ourselves to God in Christ through baptism.

To be dead to sin first of all means that we have decided never again to submit to it. That was the decision we made in baptism. To submit to sin is to place our hope in something that doesn’t bring us close to God but leads us away from God and life. We know, then, that we don’t want to yield to any enticement to sin but to be as immune to such enticements as a dead person is.

Listen to St. Paul: ***“Don’t you know that when we were baptized into Christ we were baptized into his death? By baptism we were buried with Christ and shared in his death.”*** Being baptized into Christ means accepting a cross, just as Christ did. He died on the cross and, if we are to die with him, the same must be true for us. Baptism, then, equals the cross. What the cross and tomb were for Christ, that baptism has to be for us.

Now we experience these realities in a different way than Christ, but we have to experience them truly and really. That is why Paul said that we have been united with Christ ***“in a death resembling his death”***. Christ never submitted to sin. He didn’t see sin as a real alternative to the cross, and so he didn’t try to avoid the cross. He feared the cross and all that went with it, as we know from his prayer in the Garden. But he didn’t flee from it but ran, so to speak, toward the will of the Heavenly Father. Christ died in his body, and we have to die first of all to sin and its attraction. We have to learn to seek the will of the Heavenly Father in every circumstance and trial. All temptation calls to us to die with Christ. To turn from it is to die, and this will happen again and again.

St. Paul tells us that we are to be raised as Christ was, but we are raised ***“to lead a new life”***. What is this new life? It is one in which sin no longer attracts us but only the will of God. Why did sin have no attraction for Christ? Because he was wholly dedicated to the will of the Father. The Son of God became human to show us how to love God. He showed us that loving God means loving one another, especially those who are in special need. But we only can live this love if we seek only the Father’s will. When you let the Spirit fill you with this love you truly die to sin. Only then can you truly love one another, for genuine love means surrendering yourself into the hands and will of the Father. What do you most deeply want? Is it God? Then you are on the path to dying to sin and thus becoming like Christ. Your destiny is the same as Christ’s.

Both the cross and the tomb are to be yours. They come with turning away from sin, as Christ did in the desert. We turn wholly to God and show it by loving one another in God, especially by loving those in distress. Once the greater evil, sin, has been killed in you, the lesser evil, physical death, will also be destroyed. We will all rise with Christ just because we have all died with Christ. Don’t be afraid. What the Spirit worked in Christ the Spirit will work in you.

THE SAVING ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN CHRIST

A reflection from a sermon by St. Augustine

Faith assures us that we are all members of Christ's Body, the Church. So, you are a member of a community whose head is Christ. He died for us and rose again out of love. You have come to place your hope in this Risen Divine Master and have come to understand that your spiritual health depends upon the bond of love that makes all believers one body under the one head who is Christ. Reflect on the fact that our health depends on our bond with Christ in his body.

Anyone whose love has grown cold is an unhealthy member of Christ's body. But the One who has already raised our head from death certainly has the power to heal his members as well. The fearful possibility is that one might cut oneself off completely from Christ. Even sin doesn't separate one from Christ's body, provided one remains attached to it. The vital thing, then, is not to lose one's hope in Christ and in his Body and its other members. A limb, no matter how sick, can always hope to recover health. If cut off completely it has no hope.

As St. Paul reminds us, the members of a body—and especially of the Body of Christ, all help one another make each one's special contribution to the welfare of all. One of these contributions is helping unhealthy members. This is God's will. Think of the following facts.

Christ is the head of the Church and the Church is Christ's body. The whole Christ is the head and body together. We have a head who intercedes for us in heaven. He is Risen, immortal, sinless and seated at God's right hand. Christ is at this very moment offering himself in atonement for our sins. He does that forever. His goal is that all rise from death, as he has, and let themselves be transformed, as he has. That will make us able to follow him to glory in Heaven. Where the head is there the members will be too. So, we must never give up hope! We shall be where our head is.

You all know how much Christ, our head, loves us. He labors with us here on earth so long as the Church's labors have not ended. He continues to be hungry and thirsty and without clothes and an outcast and sick and in prison. He has told us that wherever members of his body suffer he suffers too. He also helps them. He does this especially through the other members of the body! If you have been given a special ability or possession, it has been given so you can help others. That holds true especially for those who are unhealthy and have in some measure separated themselves from other members of the body. We are called to reach out to them and find ways to help them to spiritual as well as bodily health.

We all long to hear Christ say: "*Come, blessed of my Father, and receive the kingdom which has been prepared for you since the beginning of the world*". To whom does Christ say this? To those who reach out to help other members of the one body of which we are all members. That is the task of love. God is love. Let us never cease to care for one another in every way we can. Let us never separate ourselves from the loving which is the life-blood of Christ's Body.

GOD'S PLAN FOR THE WORLD'S SALVATION

A reflection from Against Heresies by St. Irenaeus

We are saved body and soul by Christ. He does this especially by feeding us with his blood given in the Eucharistic chalice and his body given in the Eucharistic bread we break. But there is no blood or body without the veins, the flesh and all the rest of what makes up a human being. The Word of God actually became human and redeemed us with his own human blood and body. Keep in mind what St. Paul tells us: “*In Him, through his blood, we have been redeemed and our sins have been forgiven*”.

We are Christ's members and we are nourished by all Creation as God's gift to us. It is God who causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall, just as he declared it is his blood that we receive from the chalice that is creation! Where would we get nourishment except from God's creation. Our chalice mixes the wine with the bread, and the word of God makes these elements the body and blood of Christ. God makes us live and grow through them. Indeed, through them God gives us an eternal life.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that “*we are members of Christ's body*”, of his flesh and bones. He is not speaking only of a spiritual and incorporeal person, for spirits don't have flesh and bones, as we know Christ has. Paul is speaking of a real human body composed of flesh, sinews, and bones and nourished by a creation that is made Christ's own body and blood. All this receives nourishment from the bread and wine that are Christ's body and blood.

A small slip taken from a vine is planted in the ground and, in due time, it becomes itself a vine and bears fruit. A grain of wheat is planted in the ground and gradually decays so that it may spring up and be multiplied by the hidden action of God's Spirit. The Spirit of God sustains all things. Whatever is alive dies in some way, and, by God's power, then rises up again to produce new life. The Spirit of God multiplies all hidden things.

It is the wisdom of God which created all things that sustains them and places them at our service. Some receive God's word and become eucharist. God sends his Word into his creation to transform it and prepare it to be raised up as a new and ever-enduring creation. Our bodies will be buried in the earth but God will raise them up to serve him and praise him always. The word of God will raise all up to give God glory forever. God will clothe mortal nature with immortality and endow our corruptible selves with incorruptibility.

God doesn't save just a part of us but saves and preserves all that is part of us—body and spirit. We are to rejoice in all this and make it a part of that which leads all that comes from God back to God. God's power is shown most perfectly in weakness. Let us rejoice in what is strong and in what is weak. All is to give glory to God. His glory lasts forever.

THE TRUTH OUR FAITH REVEALS

A reflection from a sermon by St. Ephrem

Death, we say, trampled our Lord underfoot. But then he used death itself simply as a pathway to richer and fuller life. Death if you look at it clearly is only an absence.

God fills every emptiness with fullness. Christ submitted to death, so to speak, and endured it willingly because by this means he would be able to lead us to a fullness we could otherwise not even imagine. Death seemed to have its own way when our Lord went out from Jerusalem carrying his cross. Then by his loud cry from the cross to the Father he summoned all the dead from the underworld and into endless life. Death has no power of its own; it is only an absence which God fills in Christ.

We often say that death slew Christ by means of the body which he had assumed. But it was that very body that served as the weapon to end death. We call that conquering death though there was really nothing to conquer and only emptiness to fill. Godhead has no fear of death because it is inexhaustible fullness. The natural life humans have can end, but its end is changed by Christ. Now what seems to many the ending of life is really a passage toward its new beginning.

It seemed that death had a power over Christ because of his human body and its human life. Actually, the body which he received from the Virgin, was used to show us that death is nothing and that trust in God is only a path to life. He descended, we say, into death and the underworld, and there he found Eve, the first mother of our race, the mother of all living human beings. She had rejected God's way to the Tree of Life, thinking that she would gain a marvelous wisdom. She found only emptiness. This was revealed finally and fully through the Virgin Mary who gave birth to the revelation that is Christ. His was a new life, because he was not conceived of human seed but by the Holy Spirit. That new life dwelt within her and came forth from her to fill the entire human race.

The one who was a carpenter's son took a cross and set it up, not as a path to death but an instrument by which to lead the human race into the dwelling place of never-ending life. Since our choice of a tree that destroyed life had left us feeling hopeless, Jesus took that tree and remade it into a tree of life. It became a bridge by which we pass over from merely human life to divine life.

We give glory to you, Lord, who raised up your cross to span the jaws of death like a bridge by which all might pass from the region where fullness failed and emptiness prevailed into the Land of the Living. We give glory to you who put on a mortal human body and made it into a source of endless life, for every mortal man and woman and child. Your murderers sowed your body in the earth as farmers sow grain; it sprang up and yielded an abundant harvest of human beings all raised from the dead.

Come, let us offer our Lord the great and all-embracing gift of our love. Let us pour out the treasury of humans and prayers before him. He offered his cross in a sacrifice to God but it was merely the key to life and the enrichment of all. We now have fullness so let us enter into it rejoicing.