

TWENTY-FIRST WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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DO YOU WANT TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

A reflection from a letter by St. Anselm of Canterbury

“Work hard to enter by the narrow gate; I tell you that many will seek to enter and will not be able to, ... yet people will come from east and west and will sit at table in the Kingdom.” Our God cries out that the Kingdom of Heaven is for sale! Yes, the glorious bliss of this Kingdom which surpasses the power of mortal eyes to see or mortal ears to hear or mortal hearts to conceive, is for sale. And yet if anyone asks its price the answer is: There is no need for any earthly payment. To obtain the Kingdom from the One who wishes only to bestow it as a gift only one thing is needed, love. After all, no one can give God anything he doesn't already possess because everything belongs to Him. Still, he doesn't give such a precious gift without asking anything. He won't give it to anyone who lacks love.

People don't give away what they hold dear to those who don't appreciate it, and so God won't bestow his precious gift on those who don't value it. The gift is love and if you receive it you love. Love is the one thing God asks in response to this gift. Indeed, God can't give it without receiving love. Give love, then, and receive the Kingdom. Love and it is yours.

Reigning in Heaven consists in exercising one single power, and doing it together with God and all the angels and saints. It is the power to love. And reigning means being united with God and the holy ones in loving. Love God more than your self and already you will have begun to have what you desire to possess fully. Be at one with God and already you are beginning to reign with God and all the holy ones. In Heaven the desire of God and the desire of the saints are one. If you love as they do you are one with them. If you desire only God, then what you desire will be what the saints do.

Do you want to reign in Heaven? Love God, and all others, and love now as you will when you are in Heaven. Then you will be the sort of person you want to be and you will love God and everyone in the way loving is done in Heaven.

We can't have such perfect love unless we empty our hearts of every other love that is separate from it. Those who fill their hearts with love of God and neighbor long for nothing but the will of God. And that shall be the will of other human beings so long as they love nothing but what God loves. This is why we devote ourselves to prayer, to spiritual conversations, and to reflections on God. This is a way of loving God. But it is a joy to love God—for all who want most of all to think and speak and hear of the One they love most. That is why we rejoice with the rejoicing, weep with the weeping, show compassion to those in distress, and give to the needy. This is loving others as one loves oneself. Hence we devalue riches, power, pleasure, honor and praise—for those who love these things frequently offend God and neighbor.

Think of the two commandments on which the entire law and prophets depend. Those who want to possess the fullness of love, which is the price of the Kingdom of Heaven, must, as a result, love even contempt, poverty, toil, and subjection to difficulty. This is what the saints do. This is what we must do, and want to do.

BECOMING FIT FOR GOD'S KINGDOM

A reflection extracted from a conference by Symeon the New Theologian

God is light. All those who are capable of seeing God have seen him as light. The light that is God's glory goes before Him and it is impossible for God to show himself as He is without revealing Divine Glory. It follows that those who have never seen this glory have never seen God either. God is light. Those who have not yet received this light haven't yet received grace. Those who have received grace, have, in fact, also received God's light and God's very self. As Christ the light, says: I live and I walk among you.

All those who haven't yet experienced this aren't fit to experience it. They are under the law in various ways. The law precedes grace. Those under law are slaves and disciples of slaves. They are hearers of the law and, as St. Paul says, offspring of the slave woman and children of darkness. It doesn't matter whether they are kings or patriarchs, or bishops, or priests, or ruling or being ruled, whether they are lay people or monks, solitaries or superiors, poor or rich, sick or healthy. Whoever lives in darkness has refused the light by refusing to repent. Repentance is the door that leads from darkness into light.

This is why we must ask whether you have ears to hear? Have you been able to understand the meaning of the words spoken to you by the Spirit? Do you, even now, have the mind of Christ? Those who do think about the Holy Writings properly and in a way that is worthy of God. It is a matter of hearing Christ speaking in one's heart. Only if Christ speaks within us can we rightly interpret the mysteries hidden in God's Word.

Listen to St. Paul: "*We speak words of wisdom, and not a passing wisdom of this present age but a secret and hidden wisdom*". It is hidden from many but revealed and known to those who are prepared to receive Christ, those who are instructed in the fear of God. We have our eyes fixed on God right now. We are speaking of God and we are speaking of what we don't know but what we do know. We testify to the light already shining in the darkness, both by day and by night. This light is within our hearts and within our minds, and shines outwardly by our deeds. It shines all around us, unfading and unchanging even though formless. It is a speaking and a working and a living and a life-giving and transforming light. It is this for all on whom it shines.

This light is love. We testify to this light when we live in the way Christ lived, and lives. We become fit to receive this light of life by praying and by longing for it. In that way we become one with the very prayer of Christ. That makes us like him. To be like Christ is to be made fit for God's Kingdom. Indeed, to love with Christ is to enter into that Kingdom.

A WAY OF LIFE THAT DRAWS OTHERS TO GOD

A reflection taken from The Confessions of St. Augustine

Monica was brought up in a modest and sober fashion. It was you who made her obedient to her parents rather than they who made her obedient to you. When she reached the age of marriage she was given to a man whom she served as her master. She tried to win him to you, preaching by the beauty of the character you had given her to make her able to call forth love and respect and even the admiration of her husband.

She endured his infidelities and never had a single quarrel with him on this subject. She was waiting for you to show mercy to him so that he might believe in you and be made chaste. He was an extremely kind person by nature but had a very hot temper. My mother knew that an angry husband is not one who should be contradicted, either in deed or word. It was only when he had calmed down and become quiet that she looked for an opportunity to explain to him the reason for what she had done in angering him, even if he had flown into a rage for no reason. There were many wives among her friends with husbands much milder than hers but whose faces were disfigured by bruises. When they got together these women would often complain but my mother would advise them that the fault lay in their tongues. They had all listened to the reading of the marriage contract; they should regard it as a legal instrument making them servants, a fact they should remember. They knew what a violent husband she had to put up with and were amazed that it had never been said that Patrick beat her or that a family quarrel lasted as much as an entire day. They asked how she managed it, and she stated the rule I have described. Those who followed it had every reason to thank her. Those who didn't follow it didn't escape being bullied and put down.

At one time her mother-in-law was angry with her because of the malicious whispering of some servants. Monica showed such a respectful attitude that she won her over her mother-in-law by patience and forbearance. The mother-in-law ended up telling her son the names of the malicious servants and asking that they be beaten. Out of deference toward his mother, and concern for the good order and peace in his household and family, he did just that. His mother told the servants that they had received the reward of trying to please her by speaking ill of her daughter-in-law. None dared to do it again and all lived together pleasantly.

Toward the very end of his earthly life, my mother finally won her husband over to you, Lord. Now that he was a believer she no longer had to complain about the things she had had to put up with before his conversion. She had always been the servant of those who serve you in faith and all who knew her had good reason to praise and honor and love you the more because of the fruits born by her holy way of life. They could experience your presence in her heart through her deeds. She had been wife to only one man, she had cared for her parents well, she had governed her household well and piously, she was well spoken of for her good works, had brought up children well, and often labored over them as though bringing them again to birth when they wandered from you. Lord, by your gift she gave each of us the care a mother gives a son and the service that a daughter gives a father.

HOW GOD DREW ME TO HIMSELF & TO A HOLY WAY OF LIFE

A reflection taken from The Confessions of St. Augustine

I had been reading St. Paul with Alypius, and now from my hidden depths, my searching thoughts dragged up and set before the sight of my heart the entire mass of my misery. A huge storm rose up within me, bringing with it a great downpour of tears. I wanted to pour them out and speak the words that came with them, so I got up and left Alypius, thinking solitude better for weeping. I went away far enough not to be embarrassed by his presence. That was how I felt, and he realized it! No doubt I had said something or other and he could feel the weight of my tears in my voice.

So I got to my feet and he, in utter amazement, stayed in the place where we had been sitting. I flung myself to the ground under a fig tree and gave free reign to my tears. They streamed and flooded from my eyes. It was an acceptable sacrifice to you, and I kept saying to you—maybe not in these exact words but with this sense: *“And you, O Lord, how long? How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever? Don’t remember my past iniquities!”* What I felt was that these sins were trapping me. In my misery I could only cry out: How long, how long this tomorrow and again another tomorrow? Why not do it now? Why not finish what I needed to do right now and let go of my uncleanness and turn to God?

That is how I spoke, weeping from my heart in bitter contrition. Suddenly, a voice came to my ears from a nearby house. It was the voice of a boy or girl, I don’t know which, and in a kind of singsong it repeated constantly the words: *“Take and read it! Take it up and read it!”* All at once my face changed. I began to think carefully and ask: Do these words occur in any sort of game children play? I couldn’t remember that I had ever heard anything like this before! I held back the force of my tears and got to my feet. I was quite certain that I needed to interpret the words as a command to open the book we had been reading, and think about the first passage that met my eyes.

I had heard that Anthony (of Egypt) had done something like this. He happened to come into church when the Gospel was being read and took its words as spoken directly to him. He heard the admonition: *“Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, then you will have treasure in Heaven. Then come and follow me!”* By this oracle he had been immediately converted to you.

So I went eagerly back to the place where Alypius and I had been sitting, since I had left the letter of St. Paul there when I got up. I grabbed it, opened it, and read silently the first passage I saw. *“Don’t live in carousing and drunkenness, nor in visiting prostitutes or wantonness, nor in strife and envy; rather put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no arrangements for satisfying the concupiscence of the flesh!”*

I didn’t even want to read further. There was no need to! At the end of the sentence, I had immediately felt my heart fill with confidence and light. All the shadows of my doubts had been swept away!

WHAT JOHN THE BAPTIST TEACHES US

An excerpt from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Jesus asked the crowd concerning John: “*What did you go out to see in the desert?*” Are you amazed that a person is living in the desert? Yet following John’s example a new race will spring up who will make the desert their home. But, then, did people go to see in the desert? Was it a reed trembling in the wind? Rather they went to see a tree stronger than any storm and with its roots fixed in heaven. Let Herod be angry and Herodias lay traps; nothing will move him or prevent his condemning an incestuous marriage. When his disciples told him everyone was going after Jesus he only replied that he was not the Christ but sent before him. What did people go out to see? They saw one who had contempt for bodily comfort and persevered immovably in mortification of the body. He did it out of desire for the good things of the spirit.

As the Spirit says, this fits us to enter the Kingdom of God even though it involves many trials and tribulations. When the Lord praised John for the roughness of his garments he warned us that those who live in kings’ palaces aren’t preparing themselves to enter the Kingdom of God. You, then, perhaps can’t imitate John in the roughness of his garments or in his sparse diet, but you can strive at least to imitate him in this—you can be firm in the way of the Lord, lest the wind blow you this way and that and right off the face of this earth. A wind may come rushing, as it did upon the house of the children of Job, and bring great ruin and even death. We need a home that is built on a rock and we must be as firm as that rock is.

Scripture tells us that Behemoth liked to lie hidden in the reeds. Now he likes to lead us to love transitory things. But they aren’t things one can lean on in difficult times or perilous circumstances any more than one can lean on a reed. Yet the Lord in his patience doesn’t break us even if we are like a reed and are being blown every which way by shifting desires.

Indeed, the call for justice and right may light a worldly life on fire. The Lord’s call and teachings are like fire and the voice of John, helping all prepare for the Lord’s coming to them, were words of fire fit to move the lazy and unfeeling heart. Like John we too are called to prepare the way for the Lord and so we must give voice to his words. We must pray that the Lord will do in us what God did in John, and that the Lord will use us as God used John. Isn’t the Lord’s voice in us? Haven’t we resolved to listen to his voice and follow him wherever he leads us?

We are certainly called to go out into the desert and there hear the word of the Lord and let it set our lives on fire. It will burn up everything in us that is merely worldly and help us cry out to others about all that our God would do in us and through us. Of ourselves we can do nothing, but we are not left to ourselves. Christ has come to us and called us to follow him. We are to let him use our voices to call all to repentance and to a way of life that cleanses the mind and the heart so that God, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, may come and dwell within us. God will work great saving deeds even through us, as small and weak as we may be.

OUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE WORLD'S SALVATION

A reflection from Fr. Teilhard de Chardin's Divine Milieu

We don't really know the degree to which our natural abilities will pass over into the Kingdom of our God. We don't know under what guise they will contribute to building up that Kingdom even now. Nevertheless, it can hardly be doubted that through God's help it is here below that we come to have the eyes and heart which will finally be transfigured so as to be the organs of a power of adoration and a capacity for blessedness which will distinguish us in God's everlasting Kingdom.

From our creed we know that it is the truth by which the saved enter intimately into Christ and God. We also know from the most general conclusions of psychoanalysis that what is perceptible enters vitally even into that which is spiritual. It follows that we must also recognize that in the great transformation which, from our first breath to our last directs, and activates the processes of development in us as in our universe, everything forms a single whole in and for God.

Reflecting on this, we begin to see distinctly the great sun that is Christ the King, Christ clothed with the world, the universal Christ, rises over our interior world and gives it light and beauty and growth. Little by little, stage by stage, everything is finally linked to that Supreme Center in whom all things are held together. Yes, the streams that flow from God as center of all also operate in the highest of human activities. They take on a distinctively supernatural form for this reason. But in order to save and to establish everyone through these sublime forces, the power of the Word Incarnate penetrates everything, even matter. That power descends into the deepest depths of the lowest forces. That means that the incarnation will be complete only when every part of the substance God has created has rejoined the Center and been completed as God wills.

“What does it mean that He ascended, except that he also descended so that he might fill the universe”. This is what Scripture asks. In reply we are told that it is through what he stimulates in us, and in every created thing, that Christ's incarnation is consummated and attains its plenitude. St. Paul tell us so. We may imagine that creation was finished long ago, but this is quite wrong. The creation process goes on even more magnificently all the time. Listen to St. Paul: *“The whole created universe in all its parts still groans as if in the pangs of childbirth.”*

We serve by helping to complete this process, even through our humblest deeds. This is where our actions find their fullest meaning and value. In whatever we do we are bringing back to God a part of the being he created and wants to bring back to himself. With each of our works, we labor to complete the fullness that God desires. We say we are bringing the cosmic Christ towards fulfillment.

TO PRAISE OUR BLESSED LADY IS TO IMITATE HER

A reflection excerpted from a sermon by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

However much we ought to love, honor and praise all the saints, we owe special love to our Lady, Saint Mary. We owe it to her above all because we ought to conform our will to the will of our Lord as much as we are able. Since she was the one whom he loved more, we ought likewise to love her the more. We should believe that no creature was so loved by God, none so honored, none so glorified, as she was. The creator himself deigned to create himself through her. He who governs all things deigned to be governed by her. The one who nourishes all things deigned to be nourished at her breasts.

How could God love any creature so much as to be born and, so to speak, created, by her. He who created her was, according to his humanity, created from her. What is to be said of the tender love he showed her? As a boy he obeyed her. He exalted her above all other creatures. Oughtn't we to do the same? Indeed, in assuming her into Heaven he has given her the fullness of redemption and glorification. Next to her Son she is our hope and advocate. In a certain sense she demands the salvation of all.

She knew great joy when the angel greeted her. She felt great joy at the coming of the Holy Spirit. What did she experience when the Son of God took flesh in her womb and became her son? She had great joy when she held him in her arms and kissed him and took care of him. She rejoiced when she heard his words and saw his miracles. But she was also greatly saddened by his passion. Yet that sadness was overwhelmed by her great joy at his resurrection and ascension. And the joy she knows now overwhelms all others.

Now she has crossed over out of this world and into God. Her joy and longing are now complete. She contemplates the brightness, power and divinity itself. Rightly can she say: *"I have found the one whom my soul loves, I hold him and will not let him go!"* She rose above all and came to the throne of God to embrace her Son. When she came there, the holy women who in this life were married, chaste and fruitful exulted. And then the widows saw her, who was also a widow, standing next to God's throne. And then the holy virgins. All saw their fulfillment in her.

After the Lord's ascension, Holy Scripture says nothing of her except that she was with the disciples in prayer. In the same way she is with us. Each station and form of human living follows her in following the Lamb. His way of life and love and prayer are seen in Blessed Mary and we echo her. The Lamb has gone before us on the way of obedience and humility and patience and sobriety and justice and charity, in heart and body. Those who follow the Lamb "wherever" he goes, follow him in every virtue and every form of love.

We see this in Blessed Mary. Let us praise her, but praise her most of all by imitating her. If we would truly praise her let us imitate her holy way of life. Let us consider the great hope which she shows us we all share. It is guaranteed us by our Lord Jesus Christ. With the Father and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns forever and ever.