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THE CHARIOT THAT IS HUMILITY

A reflection from a homily by St. Gregory Palamas

The parable of the tax collector and the pharisee is a proof of how humility can lift one from the depths of sin. In spite of having lived in sin, the tax collector joins the ranks of those who live upright lives through a single prayer, and a short one at that. It was a prayer of humility and by it the tax collector is relieved of his burden of sin, lifted up, and raised above every evil. By it he is admitted to the company of the righteous and justified by the supremely impartial judge.

Contrast this with the case of the pharisee. In his own eyes he is a person of importance and a righteous one. Because his righteousness is false he is actually condemned by his prayer! In spite of all that he has done! Really he is an insolent person, even when standing before God. For this reason every syllable he utters provokes God's anger!

Why does humility raise us to the heights of holiness and self-conceit plunge us into the abyss of sin? It is because one who has a high regard for self, and even in the presence of God, actually asks to be abandoned by God because he thinks there is no need for God's help. Why look to Heaven for mercy if you don't need it? Scripture says, "*the Lord resists the proud but gives grace to the humble*".

The tax collector went away justified, but not the pharisee. That's what the Lord himself said! He tells us it is "*because all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted*". The devil is incarnate pride, as well as arrogance, and these are the devil's own special vices. These sins drag down every human virtue because they declare the lie that we have no need of God whereas every good gift comes from God.

Humility is the virtue of the good angels. It conquers every vice and sin. Humility is the chariot in which one ascends to God. It carries one to the community of those who will be with God for endless ages. St. Paul says: "*We shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so we shall always be with God*". Humility is like a cloud in that a cloud can't by itself support anyone or anything. If we stand in humility we stand firm wherever we are. It has great power precisely because it supports one wholly by help that comes from God. That help is our chariot, one that takes us to Heaven and to God's very self. What can be more wonderful or more powerful than that?

I AM WHAT I AM ONLY IN JESUS

A reflection developed from a homily by Fr. Stephen Yim of Singapore

Nothing is known of the apostles named Simon and Jude except that Jesus chose them to bear witness to him. Legend has it that he did this in Persian Mesopotamia, where the church has existed from their day to this, usually under persecution. We are familiar with St. Jude because he is the patron of those who are in desperate need; i.e., when people don't know where to turn they ask St. Jude to pray for them. Who wouldn't want to be remembered for more than two thousand years as one who was close to Jesus and had a special gift of praying for others?

It is an interesting fact that depictions of St. Jude always show him with a picture of Jesus on a medallion around his neck. He, and even more his fellow apostle Simon, picture Jesus by what they do. What do they do? They proclaim Jesus and they imitate his constant turning to the Heavenly Father in prayer. Is there anything that any of us need to do besides letting our God make us an image of Jesus and ourselves carry that image always in our heart?

We are probably headed for obscurity and oblivion. In a couple of centuries who will remember the details of what we did with our lives? But more and more people are coming to Jesus and to the Heavenly Father all the time. As St. John the Baptist said: He must increase and I must decrease. That should be our prayer constantly. That's what it means to choose to be instruments for the proclamation of the Good News.

Saints Simon and Jude are named in the First Roman canon of the Mass. All who pray using that canon remember them as chosen by Jesus and made close to Jesus by God's grace. That is what all Christians pray for. Whether we are remembered by name is of no special importance. We are always with God and God is always mindful of us. Jesus is God and if we are inseparable from Jesus we are inseparable from God. That is what we pray for constantly.

These two saints are remembered as martyrs. All we know is that just as the world hated Jesus, and crucified him, so the world hates those whom Jesus has chosen as his witnesses. They are models for all who suffer because of their faith in Jesus. Whenever we undergo hardships, even interiorly, because we are struggling to let our faith be our very life and the source of all our hopes, we are experiencing the hatred of the world as it has come to be even within us. We have announced that we want to "leave the world" and cling only to Christ. That is what Simon and Jude announced, and what they did wherever they proclaimed the Gospel in word and by their lives. We have experienced that hatred and the pain and suffering that comes with it. Do we rejoice in this? Do we experience our sufferings themselves as reminders that we have chosen Christ as the Way and the Truth and the Light? To remember that is certain a grace that brings us close to our Lord. It is the best assurance we can have that we are close to God and that we do God's will. That too is what we constantly pray for. Praise God that we have been given such a gift.

LEARNING POVERTY OF SPIRIT

A reflection from The Ladder of Spiritual Love by Jan van Ruysboeck

The first fruit which springs from pure good will is voluntary poverty. Those who are poor of their own will live free and without care for non-needed earthly goods. Like a wise merchant they have traded earth for heaven. They have believed that one can't service both God and the kingdoms of this world. Voluntary poverty is the field in which they have found the treasure that is God's Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is love and charity and the practice of all good works. People who do this are generous, compassionate, kind, mild, truthful and honest toward all, especially those in need of their help. They have done works of mercy because they have nothing of their own but all they have is held in common with God and God's household.

The covetous are rash and foolish. They trade heaven for earth, even though they know they must soon leave earth. The covetous prefer the husk to the kernel, the shell to the yolk. The more they own the more they long for. They have much but aren't satisfied. Few love them, for the covetous deserve no love. What they grasp they can't let go of. When death comes they lose everything and inwardly are a picture of hell which can never have enough.

Blessed, indeed, are the poor in spirit, who possess nothing transitory for they have followed Christ. They shall be rewarded in virtues; they shall receive a hundred fold in what they are—for they will be like Christ. They can look forward to God and life in hundred fold measure. They are like camels who are made able to pass through a needle's eye. Even though they live poor in earthly things, if they choose God before all else and die in want they shall have endless life and all the good that goes with it.

Legend says that the devil can never let go of anything that is in his grasp. The poor in spirit can and do let go of everything so that they may share all that comes to them with others, and especially with those in need. Keep it in mind that people need spiritual goods much more than they need earthly ones. God has given you spiritual gifts and has given you the desire to share them with everyone. That is what your longing to be poor in spirit means. You don't long simply to be without but you long to share the marvelous life in God's Spirit that comes to its fullness only in Heaven. To be called to God's Kingdom is to be called to every sort of genuinely good thing. It is being called to the everlasting fellowship of those who want nothing more than they want to share every real and blessed good that is theirs. Become such a person, by God's grace, and you will find God and every good thing besides.

THE REALITY THAT IS HOPE

A reflection from The Lord of History by Fr. Jean Danielou

The most distressful and catastrophic periods of history have at times provided inspiration for prophetic and apocalyptic writers. The great Hebrew prophets regarded the destruction of Jerusalem not only as a punishment but as the first act in a judgment upon the entire world. Today there is a tide of pessimism which runs through our views of what is going on in history and some have declared it the prelude to the end of the world.

Prophets of doom always tend to be suspect and questioned as to their authority. Yet it remains true that Christian faith includes the expectation of a “last judgment” and so we wonder if some of the gloomy so-called prophets might be right. That leads us to ask what the New Testament and so of Jesus’ words about “the end” might mean. We can begin by considering the message of Jesus’ words.

In the first place, the Lord tells us that the so-called “Last Things” have already begun to happen. The resurrection of Christ is presented to us as the first and most decisive of these “last things”. The Word of God took upon himself our humanity in the Incarnation and has cleansed it through his precious blood. He has brought our humanity to the Heavenly Father and made it part of the Heavenly Father’s house and kingdom through the Ascension. The work of salvation, we are told, has been accomplished substantially! Everything essential has been secured already!

This is part of our faith and cannot be discarded or denied. On the other hand, the work of what we call “judgment” hasn’t yet produced its consequences in justice and peace and lives dedicated fully to God and to love of one another. We are still waiting for the destruction of the regime of corruption and hatred and greed that we see all around us. It seems to many that the paradox of Christian faith is the integration of the two realities that are expectation and fulfillment.

The two realities are brought together by and in hope. If you really hope for a world dominated by justice then you will work for it indefatigably and without ever giving up. If people hope to make a great deal of money they don’t let themselves engage in merely wishful thinking about the matter; they work so hard they amaze others. That’s what genuine hope causes a person to do. Those who really hope for justice work for it with all their might and energy and ingenuity. Do you hope for a world in which all will love one another unselfishly? If you don’t work for it with all your might you don’t really hope for it. Do you hope for a world in which all will care for others in practical ways and in which the environment too is cared for? If this is a genuine hope then where are the works that spring from that hope?

Christian faith is an expectancy. Christians who live their faith live in expectancy also work incessantly to realize what they hope for. The crisis of the Church comes of the failure to live our Christian expectancy as truly and practically and with as much dedication as people of the world live theirs. If we love one another we seek to find ways to make love effective in lifting them out of abuse and oppression. We don’t simply engage in wishful thinking. That isn’t hope but despair. However long it may last, the present moment is always one of transition. It is hope that provides the human contribution to God’s plan for transforming all things. Never give up your hope! Even as he trod the way of the cross Jesus hoped. Look what has already come of this hope! Walk with Jesus!

PERSUADING YOURSELF THAT CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

A reflection from a biblical commentary by St. Cyril of Alexandria

Those who are called to be converted, redeemed and purified from sin mustn't disbelieve in the power of the grace of God that comes through Christ. When God called Israel to be converted too many of them didn't believe they could actually change. We see this very clearly in the prophesy of Isaiah. They kept thinking that what was leading them to sin was so much a part of them, was in-born in them, that they really couldn't expect themselves to be able to do what God called them to do through the prophet.

God's response to this sort of disbelief is simply to call them again: Be converted, God says, turn around and don't continue in the direction in which you're going. If you don't turn to God you can only find punishment. When God the Almighty promises to cleanse us from our sin, even from every stain of sin, he promises to free you from all in your past that keeps you stuck in sin. If you refuse to believe you should stop and consider who God is and who you are. Is anything impossible for God?

Think of how different God's ways are from our ways. That isn't reason to be discouraged; it's reason to think God has ways of dealing with your sin that are much more effective than your own. Your human thoughts are not like God's thoughts! The difference is immense. God is per-eminent in strength and in kindness. There is nothing whatever in creatures to equal divine strength and power and excellence; nothing even approaches it.

We humans are prone to anger. The supreme Being isn't subject to wrath. Humans are malicious and much given to wickedness, but God is by nature good, or rather is goodness itself. As God he will justify and forgive the ungodly, burying the errors of ignorance in oblivion and wiping away the pollution of those who have gone astray.

Consider the following way of looking at the matter. Formerly Gentiles lacked understanding and were easily led astray into every kind of excess. They wanted to do things that it is best not even to talk about. But then they received the gift of faith. They began to want to seek God. They called upon God. They abandoned their old ways and lawless impulses. When they received God's mercy they were transformed. They became different people leading a different life. They gained knowledge of what is good. Shaking off the yoke of past errors, they conquered sin and we not longer easily led astray. That is God's doing.

If this was possible then your conversion is possible. You too can want to do whatever is pleasing to God. So God asks you not to believe when you are promised the help you will need. It isn't impossible for you to have a change of heart because so many of your predecessors did receive that gift. You are able, with God's help, to do what your ancestors and other gentiles did. You can have a change of heart. Your limits are not God's. Change your ways and turn to the Lord.

LEARNING WHAT WE CAN BECOME

A reflection from the Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis

Behold the lively examples of the holy fathers and blessed saints. In them flourished and shone brightly all the true perfection of life and of religion. If you contemplate them you will see how little, almost nothing, we do in comparison with them.

Oh, what is our life when compared to theirs? They served our Lord in hunger and thirst, in fear, in cold, in nakedness, in labor and in weariness, in vigils and fastings, in prayer and in holy meditation, in persecution and in spite of many criticisms.

Think of the many and very serious tribulations the apostles, the martyrs, the confessors, the virgins and other holy saints suffered. They were indeed willing to follow in the footsteps of Christ. They refused honors and bodily pleasures in this life that they might have them in everlasting life. How strict and how abject was the life that the holy fathers led in the wilderness. How difficult were their temptations! How strict and abject a life they led in the wilderness! How powerful their temptations were. How strict and how abject a life the holy Fathers led in the wilderness. How fiercely they were assailed by their spiritual enemies. How fervent was their prayer offered daily to God. What rigorous abstinence they kept! What marvelous zeal and fervor they had for spiritual profit, how strong a battle they waged against all sin, how pure and entire their purpose toward God in all their deeds.

In the day they labored and in the night they prayed, and though in the day they labored in a bodily way, they prayed in mind. So they always spent their time fruitfully. They felt every hour short for the service of God, and because of the great sweetness they in heavenly contemplation that they often forgot bodily nourishment. All riches, all honor, dignity, kin and friends in the world they renounced for the love of God.

These were persons who had nothing in the world, and would scarcely accept anything that was useful for sustaining their bodies. They were poor in worldly goods but they were rich in grace and virtue; they were needy outwardly but inwardly in their souls they were replenished by grace and spiritual comfort. To the world they were aliens and strangers but to God they were dear and familiar friends. In the sight of the world and in their own sight they were vile and mean. In the sight of God and of the saints they were precious and singularly elect. In them shown forth all perfection of virtue—true meekness, simple obedience, charity and patience, with other similar virtues and gracious gifts of God. And so they profited daily in spirit and obtained great grace from God.

These are left as examples to all of us, especially to religious persons. Their lives should stir us to devotion and to advance more and more in virtue and grace. They help us more than innumerable dissolute and idle persons can hinder us. Let us praise God for all these saints and companions in God's coming kingdom.

THE STRUGGLE TO ASCEND THE HEIGHTS

A reflection by Petrarch

I have this very day climbed the highest mountain in this area. It is called “Windy” and the name isn’t undeserved. I was guided only by a desire to see what one could from such a high place. The thought had been with me for many years and the mountain was almost constantly before my eyes. At last the impulse seized me and I decided to put into action what had long lain in my heart. But who would be my companion? All the people I could think of seemed inadequate for the journey. At last I thought of my younger brother. He listened to me with great delight because I was thinking of him as a friend as well as a brother. So on the appointed day we set out and by evening had arrived at the foot of the mountain. It seemed an almost impossible challenge. Our only real obstacle was the terrain itself.

We met an old shepherd who tried to dissuade us. He said he had once set out to make the climb but had gotten only pains and torn clothing for his efforts. While he was shouting all this our desires only grew with each warning. So when he saw his efforts were of no avail he went ahead of us a little way and pointed with his finger to a steep path between rocks. We could see we had brought things that would only get in the way during the climb so we left them in the care of the shepherd and started out.

As usually happens, we no sooner got going than we suddenly felt weary. We went ahead a little ways and got to the top of a cliff. There we had to halt. But soon we started again and pushed on, though at a slower pace. My brother took a path straight up the mountain and was making for the top but, being less energetic, was looking for an easier way and had actually turned downwards. When called back by my brother and shown the right path, I responded that I hope the climb would be easier on the mountain’s other side and that I wouldn’t mind covering more distance if only the climb was less difficult. I was only excusing my laziness.

Meanwhile my brother had already gotten quite a way up the mountain. I hadn’t found an easier way but only worn myself out. Exhausted and disgusted with myself for walking around aimlessly I finally resolved to seek the heights. Eventually, tired and out of breath I joined my brother. He had been waiting for me and seemed quite refreshed as a result. For a time we walked on side by side. But soon, forgetting what had happened, I started straying downward looking for the easier path.

Then, my thoughts passed suddenly from material things to those incorporeal. I spoke to myself like this: “What you have experienced today quite frequently happens to mountain climbers. And you can’t help knowing it is what happens to many who enter upon the way to blessedness. The life which we term blessed is found in a higher place and narrow is the way that leads to it. That’s what we are told. Many are the steep slopes that get in the way; we have to climb with mighty strides to go from virtue to virtue.” I don’t need to tell you that this little inner discourse was elevating to my mind, and my body too seemed to be spurred on to make the rest of the ascent.

Finally, we reached the top. I was deeply moved, especially as I looked down and saw where we had come from. The clouds were actually under my feet. It had been ten years since I left my studies. How many changes had taken place! Yet now I could see how I had changed for the better. With St. Augustine I could want only to love you, O my God!