

THE FOURTH WEEK IN LENT

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A reflection developed from a Letter by St. Ambrose

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by Carlo Cardinal Martini

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ACCEPTING THE LORD'S HEALING PERSONALLY

A reflection developed from a Letter by St. Ambrose

The Lord Jesus, when he was merely walking along, caught sight of a person who had been blind from birth. If the Lord didn't ignore him neither will he ignore us, and we shouldn't overlook that fact. The Lord considers us worthy of his attention. Now we should notice the fact that this person had been blind from birth. It is important—not only for the person the Gospel story talks about but for each of us. Until Christ gave us light we too were blind, born blind.

There are various kinds of blindness. For instance, it may result from serious illness or age obscuring one's vision and this can often be cured. Take that caused by cataracts; it can be cured when a surgeon removes its cause. But those Jesus encounters aren't curable by surgical skill but only by the power of God. When nature is defective the Creator, who is the author of nature, has the power to restore it. That is what has happened to us. We were naturally lacking what we needed to see spiritually. Jesus said: *"As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world"*. So, all who are blind are able to gain sight through Jesus.

But this is only the case if one knows to whom to go to receive sight. Jesus is saying to us: Come! Receive the light so that you may become able to see! What is Jesus telling us? Think! Jesus brought human beings back to life; Jesus restored people to health—and by a simple word of command; Jesus said to a corpse, *"Come out!"*, and Lazarus came out of the tomb; Jesus said to a paralytic, *"Arise and pick up your mat"*, and the man rose and picked up the mat he had been lying on—as helpless and a cripple. What, then, is Jesus conveying to us by the story of how he spit on the ground, mixed his spittle with the clay, and put it on a blind person's eye, saying *"Go and wash yourself in the pool of Siloam"*? We are told that 'Siloam' means "sent"; be washed by the one who has been sent, Jesus.

Surely the Lord's actions and words have great significance for us or they would not have been made part of the proclamation of the salvation that comes in Jesus the Christ. The person healed received more than just physical sight. Jesus' touch not only healed but enlightened. He teaches us that God, who made us out of clay, can heal and enlighten us. We too are to come to the one whom God "sent" to give us this gift. In Christ we will be able to see. We will see that everything that happens to us is an opportunity to draw closer to God by love and obedience. We were blind and have received the ability to see—if we will use it continually. We do this when we see our every action and reaction as something we do in and with our God. We do this when we confess this to those we live with and with whom we share our lives and caring deeds. In doing it we are redeemed. We walk in faith with our God and that opens our eyes to his loving presence healing us more and more deeply and completely. *"The night is almost over and the day is at hand!"* Begin to walk in the light of that new kind of day.

OUR FAITH JOURNEY

A reflection developed from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

In telling the story of Jesus' healing of one born blind St. John the Evangelist underlines the ability that faith in Jesus brings to refuse to give up but to seek to follow God's way through an encounter with Jesus. He person meets Jesus in the Temple; he came to pray and give thanks. Jesus had healed, without any conditions, a person who didn't even know who he was. St. John turns this into a model for the faith journey through which everyone comes to God through Jesus.

There are many people present but St. John first focuses attention on the small group of Pharisees. They witness the miracle but they don't "see" what it means. The problem is that they always stay the same and don't change. They, you see, already "know" everything about God and how God acts and so don't take Jesus' mysterious signs seriously. They can't "see" that God acts in ways outside their understanding. So, they judge that Jesus is a sinner because he doesn't observe the Sabbath in the way they "know" it must be observed. His actions don't match their ideas of God and of the Messiah, the Anointed One.

This is a kind of warning. We can't make a journey of faith to God with Jesus if we think we already see and know everything God wants. If one does one ends up not seeing the glory of God in Jesus and Jesus' works. Our journey requires that we be open to change—inwardly even more than outwardly. One who is blind, on the other hand, is ready to be renewed and taught new things. Physical transformation is overshadowed by faith transformation. Bodily needs somehow become opportunities to be made aware of deeper poverties. Do we seek not only physical things but a person who will fill our life and make us whole in a new way? Are we ready to leave behind old concepts, so as to open ourselves to the person who shows us spiritual newness? Like that ancient blind man, are you ready to be mocked and laughed at and pushed aside so that you can share in the newness of life which God has kindled in your heart?

St. John's Gospel outlines a process of growth. First one who had been blind and was then cured by one he didn't know, recognizes that Jesus is the one who helped him. Then he sees Jesus as a prophet, one who speaks for God. Finally, he accepts Jesus as Messiah and Savior. But, in the background, there is always a crowd, and we are part of that crowd. We listen to the words of Jesus and we too plead for help. And Jesus looks at us and is concerned for us. We have been there listening and hoping throughout Jesus' ministry. We need to recognize Jesus concern for us in what St. John says about the "crowds". Jesus nourishes us. Jesus heals us inwardly. Jesus teaches and forms us. Jesus knows we can accept a call to follow him, and in a way that perfectly suits the gifts we have been given and the life we led before we encountered him. So, let's seriously accept his call and follow him.

JOURNEYING TO THE TRUTH

A reflection excerpted from a sermon by St. Bernard

Watch and pray that you do not enter into temptation. These were the Lord's words when he was approaching his passion. Notice how often at this time he prayed not for himself but for his disciples. If there was such peril for disciples because of their Lord's passion how much greater is the peril we run because of our own passion. We read that life on earth is full of temptations, and, if the is the case, we must constantly be on watch lest we fall. In the Lord's prayer we beg, "*lead us not into temptation*".

Yet, however surrounded we may be by temptations, the Truth surrounds us as with a shield. Evidently this must be a spiritual shield, since it can surround us on all sides. The Lord doesn't primarily protect our physical selves or things but what is spiritual in us and in our lives. He teaches us to seek first the Kingdom of God, and then everything else will be given us. Of course, without the physical things we can't live or seek God, and the Heavenly Father doesn't want us to be so preoccupied with such things that we slight our spiritual growth and the exercises that involves. He really is with us at all times watching over us.

This is part of that Truth to which our God would lead us. This truth will surround you like a shield. That is why you need not fear the terror of the night or the arrow that flies by day or the boggy that prowls in the darkness nor assault by the noonday devil. These words point out the four temptations by which we are surrounded and thus shows why we need the shield of Truth.

Rather than feeling secure, however, we ought to be wary of temptation; we ought to beg to be delivered from it. I can't promise you perfect freedom, or quiet rest, not so long as you are in this moral body of ours. But we may consider how God's kindness shows us care in allowing us to suffer some light temptations while warding off the more dangerous ones. God delivers us from those, to face the ones God knows will be more useful to us in our spiritual growth.

Think then of the trials you face by night, awake or asleep. Then you discover how little you have turned away from old habits and lusts. In the same way, when the burden of daily labor weighs heavily on us and exhausts us we must fear grumbling and discontent. Indeed, both by night and day the primary danger is our own feeling of fear. It increases the power of temptation the more we flee it without turning to prayer and holy thoughts. No matter the number of our temptations there is one cure for them all—we must turn to the Lord. Then he becomes our shield in truth.

The more filled we are with this truth the less fear can master us or control us by making us flee from our own feelings and thoughts and sense of weakness. Do not be afraid. The Lord cares for you and loves you and gives you what is needed to resist and overcome every temptation. In this truth we can find rest and peace.

A Meditation: The Annunciation

By Karl Rahner

The Annunciation begins what John later joyously proclaimed: “The Word became flesh”. (Jn.1: 14) This is the victory of God over all Godlessness; this is the triumph of grace over all opposition; this is the unexpected and incomprehensible revelation of the immense love of God. The magnificence of the salvation-news that was brought to us by the Incarnation of the Son of God is already anticipated at one stroke, when Gabriel says to Mary: “You have found grace before God. You will conceive and bear a Son. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of his father, David; he will rule over the House of Jacob forever and there will be no end to his Kingdom.”

But the scandalous character of the Incarnation begins with this announcement: From now on, we find glory in humiliation, fullness in emptiness, riches in poverty, life in death. His future and his death-agony begin already when he is received by Mary. At that moment, the descent and the kenosis truly begins for him. The cross becomes his throne. God wanted to put himself in those realities so that we might find him in them. The desert wasteland of our human existence, our poverty, weakness, sickness, incarceration in darkness, our life on a dead-end street—these things are now filled with the Truth of his life, with his freedom that is true freedom, and with the majesty of his power. We do not have to seek God any more in his unattainable otherness for He is right where we are.

God is looking at us from every point of the compass. God is carrying our burden. God has tasted the bitterness of our life, has travelled our streets, and meets us in the brothers and sisters of our own race. But that the saving victory of God’s grace is concealed without our weakness so that it really confirms our distressing situation—we do not want to put up with this! Certainly, we would like to see the Incarnation of God, but in such a way that by means of it we can escape our ennui. But, it just so happens that Christian existence means being called to a life of scandal—that of God’s coming in our flesh, and the paradox of glory coming only through the kenosis of the cross.

From the moment of the Annunciation, Mary is intimately affected by all these tensions. Her fate is the same as that of her child—not only in glory but especially in labors, insults, and death. To be sure, the angel greets her as one perfectly graced, so that her heart is filled with the joy that she sings in her Magnificat. But at the same time, her great favor of grace has its bitterly serious side. Through this grace she becomes the Mother of Sorrows. From the moment she utters her “Yes” to God’s will she becomes suspect and, at it were, an outcast. After she gave birth to her child, he himself became a puzzle to her. But she accepted all of that when she answered the angel: “Behold, I am the slave of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word.” This must be our response as well.

THE FOLLOWING OF CHRIST IN SPIRIT

Extracted from The Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis

“One who follows me”, says Christ our Savior, “doesn’t walk in darkness but has the light of life”. These are words of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are being admonished to follow his teachings and his manner of living. If we would truly be enlightened and delivered from all blindness of heart we must do this.

Let us all the fervor of our heart be from now on directed to meditating on the life of Christ. His holy teachings are of more strength and helpfulness than the words of all the angels and saints together. Whoever, through grace, has the inner openness of soul for true contemplation of the Gospel of Christ will find in these words a hidden manna.

It often seems that people who hear the Gospel and do no more find little sweetness in what they hear. The reason is that they don’t listen with the spirit of Christ. Do you desire to have a right understanding of Scripture, especially of the Gospels? They you must dedicate yourself to conforming your life as much as you can to Christ’s life.

What good will it be for anyone to reason about lofty and hidden mysteries, like that of the Trinity, if that person lacks humility? Such a one is displeasing the Holy Trinity rather than being drawn near. In very truth, such a path is useless. You can’t make yourself holy by deeply questioning and reasoning. It is a good life that makes one righteous and holy and beloved of God. I would rather feel compunction of heart for my sins than merely know the correct definition of compunction.

If you know all the books of the Bible by memory, and if you know all the sayings of the philosophers by heart, what good can this do you unless you receive grace and charity? Except for loving God and serving God there is nothing but emptiness in the world. Realizing this is the noblest and most excellent wisdom any creature can have. By putting the world down to its true value, one draws nearer and nearer to the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is a very empty thing to labor inordinately for worldly wealth, which will perish in no long time. It is similarly empty to covet honor or any out of order pleasure or merely fleshly delights. Do this in the present life and you will be bitterly punished. It is a supreme vanity to desire a long life while caring little about living a good life. You are paying attention to present things rather than what is coming. You are loving what will shortly be gone.

Dedicate yourself to withdrawing your love from what is merely visible and turning it to the invisible realities. Those who follow only what they sense hurt themselves and lose the grace of God. The eye is not satisfied or pleased just by seeing, nor is the ear satisfied by mere hearing. That is proverbial wisdom and to be kept always in your mind. True satisfaction is found only in love for God.

MERCY SANCTIFIES US AND ALL WE DO

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Pope Leo the Great

In John's Gospel we hear: "*All will know you are my disciples if you love one another*". In one of John's Letters we hear: "*Beloved, let's love one another. Love is from God and all who love are born of God and know God; one who doesn't love doesn't know God, because God is love*".

With this in mind, those who believe should enter into themselves and make a true judgment regarding their attitudes of mind and heart. If we find in our hearts a storehouse of love and love's fruits then we need have no doubts about God's presence within us. If, besides, we want to increase our capacity to receive so great a guest, then we should do good with greater generosity. We should do it with persevering charity.

Any time is the right time for deeds of charity. These days of Lent, however, offer special encouragement. After all, we want to be present to the Lord's Passover in holiness of mind and body. So, we should work above all to receive the grace of charity. Charity contains all other virtues, and it covers a multitude of sins.

This is a time to offer help to the poor, and to all afflicted in any way, and with a generosity that is increasingly open-handed. If we use fasting to support help to the needy, they we bring it about that many voices join together to thank and praise God. No way of dedicating ourselves to God as believers gives God greater pleasure than lavishing on the poor what they need. Where God finds charity and its loving concern for others, God recognizes a reflection of his own care for all of us.

We are called to do acts of giving and self-giving. We need not fear any lack of means. A generous spirit is already a beautiful thing and to be able to share it shows we have great spiritual wealth. It is Christ who helps and Christ who is helped. There can't be a shortage of things to share if that is the case. Christ is one who multiplies bread simply by breaking it. Christ teaches us to increase what we have by giving it away.

One who gives alms, of any sort, should be free of anxiety and filled with joy. Our gain is greatest when we keep back least. Listen to Paul: One who provides seed to those who sow also provides bread for those who are eating, and he will provide you with more seed and increase your harvest of goodness. This is done in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

We are preparing to celebrate the greatest of all mysteries. Through it the blood of Christ did away with our sins. Let's make ready by a sacrificial offering of works of mercy. In all such works we give to God, in the person of his poor, what God has given to us. We also forgive those who have sinned against us just as God has forgiven us. We have no reason to fear. Let us rejoice and be glad.

LETTING GO OF OUR SIN

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Augustine

We have just sung psalm 140. Listen to the words, *“I have called to you Lord; hurry to help me!”* Did you make these words your own? Now no believer can pray thus without praying together with the whole Church. They are the words of the Church. This is because, while he was on earth, Christ prayed them and he could do this only because he shared our humanity. He prayed, for instance, while he hung on the Cross and he was unable to hang there except because he shared our mortal body. We all share such a body and we have all been given a share in Christ. He prayed to the Heavenly Father not only for himself but for us; he died for us and not just for himself. He is still one with us and we are all members of his Body. And so, we pray with him.

Scripture tells us that in the Garden Jesus prayed with such earnestness that his sweat became like drops of blood. We are invited to pray with him and to pray with such earnestness that the blood of all who suffer for Christ and with Christ for the Heavenly Father may be as truly ours as it is truly the blood of Christ.

“I have called to you, Lord; hurry to help me! Hear my voice when I cry to you!” Did you perhaps imagine that crying out was over for you when you called upon the Lord? Do you imagine that you are now safe from all care? Indeed, there will come a time when all anguish is ended, and then there will be no more crying out. But it has not yet come for Christ’s Body, and so it has not come for you. Christ’s Body, the Church, must suffer until the end of time.

When the end comes, then we will no longer pray: *“I have called to you; hurry to help me!”* Then God will have heard our voice as we cried out. But even now we turn to God in prayer. We have just prayed: *“Let my prayer rise up before you like incense; let the raising of my hands be like an evening sacrifice!”* More, we know that it was not only a personal prayer but that it was the prayer of the whole Christ, our head and his Body.

As evening drew near, the Lord yielded up his life upon the Cross. He handed it over to the Heavenly Father in the certainty of receiving it back. We too hang there with him, and we too give ourselves completely into the Heavenly Father’s hands. Our human weakness, that of our nature and that which is personal to us, was nailed there to the cross with Christ. This is his and our evening sacrifice.

What sacrifice could be more acceptable to God? All we have to do is to let go of our sins along with our hearts and minds and selves. This prayer, as it arises from our hearts, our faithful hearts, is a sacrifice wholly pleasing to God. It is Christ’s sacrifice as much as, or even more, than it is ours personally. The same perfume of self-giving, however, issues from us and from Christ. St. Paul says it perfectly: *“Our unregenerate nature has been fastened to the cross along with Christ so that our sin-stained humanity may be renewed and cleansed and we ourselves may no longer be slaves to sin.”* Live the gift you have received.