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HOW JESUS ENCOUNTERS & TRANSFORMS US

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

This Sunday we hear the story of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman. Jesus takes the initiative. He does so at the beginning by asking for a drink of water. She has come for water, as part of her human effort to make life meaningful and pleasant. But Jesus' mercy cuts across this human search and its vagueness. His words shape their encounter and ask her to reshape the desires that brought her to the well by expanding her awareness of what she, and all of us, seek.

The woman is looking for water and Jesus invites her to think beyond the sort of water she initially wanted. As she listens she senses that he bears the mysterious gift of prophecy—after all, he knows her past life. She tries to make sense of the meeting by relating him to well-known biblical personalities, here that of Jacob who had the well dug. Jesus invites her to leave aside these ways of understanding what's happening. He suggests what she really wants is salvation and so the truth hinted at in the Bible's mysterious messianic prophecies.

Again, the woman tries to interpret what Jesus says in conventional ways; e.g., the controversies about whether Samaritans properly worship God. Won't the Messiah settle these matters? But Jesus wants her to think of herself and her quest for life rather than distract herself with such matters. He tries to broaden her perspective and make it personal. What's happening to her is a "saving opportunity", a *kairos* in the New Testament's Greek.

Jesus always starts from our concrete situation and opens it so one glimpses a radical newness beckoning to us. It points us toward God's saving design. Jesus is The Truth; in him and in the Gospel, we encounter the full and total truth of ourselves in relation to our God. There is in us all a longing for this truth and it is there even in the most ordinary situations, when they bring us to Jesus.

Think of what the Holy Spirit gives to one who believes in Jesus. The Spirit gives the ability to interpret the circumstances of life as opportunities to reflect on one's own and one's life's meaning, and to open oneself to the richer, deeper meaning offered us in Jesus and the Gospel. The Spirit gives us the ability to grasp the power of Jesus and the Gospel to unify us inwardly with Jesus as the center of our living. The Spirit gives us the ability to assimilate the power of the languages Jesus uses to speak with us—not only ordinary language but that of the Bible and the liturgy and theology—and without letting it sound banal; all are turned into talk about our relationships, starting with that to Jesus. And Jesus draws her toward the community created by faith in Him and his message and tells her it is the saving community she has sought in five marriages but not found. She is inspired to begin to share what she has experienced with Jesus by leading her friends and neighbors to encounter him as she did. "He knew all about me, and showed me how to live. Don't you want this too?!"

LEADING ONE ANOTHER TO THE TRUTH

A reflection from Degrees of Humility & Pride by St. Bernard

Knowledge of the truth is knowledge of Christ, and it is given us in three degrees. In the first instance, we are led to seek truth in ourselves and about ourselves. In the second, we are led to seek the truth that is in our neighbor, and in the third we are given truth in its own essential nature.

One begins to discover truth in oneself when one passes judgment on oneself. One is given truth through the neighbor when we suffer in sympathy with another. We are led to truth itself when we contemplate in purity of heart.

Notice the order in which truth is given us. Before we can inquire into truth itself The Truth has to teach us to seek it with our neighbor and before we do this we must be opened to finding it in ourselves. The sequence of the Beatitudes listed in the Sermon on the Mount put the blessing of being merciful before that of being pure in heart. The merciful are those who are quick to see truth in their neighbor when they reach out to others in compassion and identify with them in love. They respond to another's joys and sorrows as if they were their own. They make themselves weak with the weak and they burn with indignation when others are led astray and harmed. They are always ready to share not only the joys of those who are rejoicing but the sorrows of those who are mourning.

The exercise of charity toward one's neighbor cleanses a person's inner vision. Those who are thus cleansed can delight in the contemplation of truth as such. It is, after all, love of truth that causes us to take upon ourselves the misfortunes of others. But can anyone find truth like this in relation to the neighbor if they refuse to support them in these ways? Suppose they scoff at tears or disparage joys. This seems to be insensitive to all feelings but one's own. A popular saying illustrates it: "A healthy person can't feel the pains of sickness, nor can the well-fed feel those of hunger." The more familiar we are with sickness or hunger the greater our compassion for the sick or hungry is likely to be.

Just as pure truth can be grasped only by the pure in heart, so the sufferings of our fellow men and women are truly felt best by those who know suffering themselves. We can't sympathize with the wretchedness of others—spiritual as well as physical—if we don't first recognize our own. So we start by receiving truth about ourselves. Then we are prepared to understand the feelings of others by what we have personally felt. Then we know how to come to their help through the help we have received. Our Savior suffered himself so that we might know his compassion and he accepted affliction so we might know his mercy. Scripture says he learned what obedience costs through suffering. In all this our Savior has shown us the path that leads to genuine contemplation. We have only to follow him.

THE GIFTS OF DELIVERANCE

A reflection excerpted from a sermon by St. Bernard

We have all heard the Scripture: “He has delivered me from the snare of the hunter and from the sharp word.” If we would understand and give thanks for our deliverance we have to understand who the hunters are, what their snares are, and what the sharp word is.

Who are the hunters? They are people who should lead us to God but lay snares to lead us to merely worldly goods. We have all been led to God and given a new life. We are like young plants that needs special care. For instance, we need to be trained to distinguish what is good from what is evil. For instance, we have to learn not to luxuriate in sensual pleasures. I beg you, then, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God and obey the words of those who have been taught by long experience and daily practice how to know what pleasures lead away from God and life. This is what happens when we learn to see snares.

Listen to what St. Paul tells us: “Those who desire to be rich in this world, fall into many temptations and the devil’s snare.” Are these riches snares? How few want to be delivered from them and even regret not being caught in more. Are we ready to recognize that it is better to follow the Son of Man who had nowhere to lay his head? If so give thanks with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and sing, “He has delivered me from the snare of the hunters!”

In order to know how great this deliverance is listen to the sharp words of the Lord. “Away from me, you evil doers!” He speaks to those who didn’t love him because they didn’t love their neighbor but loved only self. Knowing this, how do you react when called to do penance? Jesus said: Unless you eat my body and drink my blood you have no life in you. Many went away remarking it was a hard saying. The point of it is that when the bread of the Eucharist enters us in order to dwell in our hearts through faith, then justice and righteousness enter. Is this a hard saying? It is a momentary affliction working within us to produce an eternal weight of glory. The word ‘repent’ is not a sharp word compared with “Depart from me!”

Have you, brethren, cast the love of riches out of your hearts? Is poverty more precious than all this world’s treasures? Think, by the labor of your hands you can feed Christ! Give thanks and say, “He delivered me from the snare of the hunter and from the sharp word”! Is there anything you should still fear? Just one thing, apostacy, the sin of Judas! So dwell on the Lord’s promises! Eye has not seen the things you have prepared, O God, for those who love you. Beneath the shadow of our God we are protected, we are refreshed, we are fed and nurtured. The Lord has hidden us away from so many evils. Shouldn’t we rejoice in this hiddenness? Yet we must never, on that account, cease from entreaty and repentance. If we wander from our God’s shadow we may grow cold like a chick outside its mother’s care. We must never wander away but abide always in our God’s care and love and warmth.

THE JOY OF PRAYING THE PSALMS

Excerpts from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

The Scriptures address us in the words of the bridegroom of the Song of Songs, saying: "You who dwell in the gardens, let me hear your voice". He may be inviting those who love him to sing psalms and pray. So let us begin by considering the discipline of heart and body we ought to employ when we sing psalms or pray in the sight of the angels. We don't want to send away the angels who came to carry our prayers up to God and bring back down to us God's gifts. Our bridegroom himself stands at the door and knocks; if no devotion answers him from within us or opens the door of our heart for him, he may go away complaining and saying, "I have given heed and listened but no one speaks what is good; there is no one who repents of his sins but they are all set on their own courses like horses with no rider to guide them."

O Jesus, true gardener, effect in us what you ask of us. For without you we can do nothing. You are the true gardener, the Creator who cultivates and protects your garden. You plan it by your word, water it with your Spirit, give growth by your power. Mary Magdalen wasn't mistaken when she thought Jesus who came to her at the empty tomb was a gardener. He is the gardener of the whole world; he is the gardener of Heaven; he is the gardener of the Church, which he plants and waters here until its growth is completed and he transplants it into the land of the living near the streams of eternally living water. There it will not be afraid when heat comes, and its foliage will always be green, and it will never cease to bear the fruit of love and praise. Blessed too are we who dwell in these gardens; forever we will praise the Lord.

We dwell in such a garden when we meditate on the Law of the Lord day and night, and walk about in as many gardens as we read books, and pick the apples of fine thoughts we are given there. Blessed are those for who all these apples, old and new, are kept safe. They are the words of prophets and of evangelists and of apostles, and through them we taste the sweetness of our bridegroom. We search the Scriptures even as we sing psalms, drawing wondrous thoughts of love for our God and his Christ as we do it. We walk about in the garden of Scripture and must not be heedless and let our minds wander but rather be busy bees gathering honey from every flower, reaping the Spirit from the words we sing. After all, Jesus says: My words are sweeter than honey.

The garden within us shall flourish in the springtime, the day of Resurrection, when Jesus will call us forth. The just shall then bloom like lilies and blossom forever. We indeed are already people who dwell in the Lord's gardens and delight in their wonders. From these gardens the Bridegroom will lead us into others where rest is more hidden and enjoyment more blessed and beauty more wonderful. Absorbed in God's praises with accents of exultation and thanksgiving we will dwell within God's very House. Even now he calls us to "come and see", taste the joy of the unapproachable light.

WHAT IS FAITH LIKE WHEN IT IS MATURE?

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

Even before Jesus was born, Joseph was a believer and mature in faith. The events surrounding the conception and birth of Jesus reveal how differently he behaved and struggled when he had to move toward a greater knowledge of God and a deeper faith in and God's will, for him and for us. The Gospel uses two key words to help us understand: "Her husband Joseph, being a man of honor and wanting to spare her publicly, decided to divorce her informally".

The exegetes have devoted much time to the meaning of this statement, since the text and its translations are not so clear as they might be. For our purposes, it is enough to say that even persons of honor, or in New Testament language, believers who are mature in faith and act out of charity) find themselves caught in anxious and difficult situations.

It seems, first, that Joseph's integrity led him to want to withhold his own name from a baby whose father he did not know. This was a matter of legal honor; Joseph can't give his name to a child that isn't his own. But, second, Joseph's integrity also insists on Mary's virtue, and so he refused to expose to the rigor of the Law a mystery he did not understand; this is goodness. Naturally, this conflict of conscience caused him pain and distress. Joseph was well aware of the Law but at that moment his mature faith and charity overcome it. He chooses the person, Mary, rather than the Law.

Can you think of how often Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their way of interpreting the Law? It was a form of hardness of heart. He doesn't criticize their attachment to the Law but their approach to justice; it lacked charity. Joseph, however, had struggled to reach a balance. He wasn't exempt from anxiety but took upon himself the decision to do the honorable thing, as he saw the matter. It was the fruit of charity. It was the fruit of his maturity in faith.

Joseph was open to the power of Divine grace and its illumination. An angel of the Lord came to resolve the situation in the end. Joseph had been afraid he wouldn't be faithful to God and the angel tells him not to fear. Then he reveals the deeper meaning of the event that so puzzled Joseph. He was probably filled with pure joy.

The figure of Joseph allows us to grasp a fundamental teaching. We need to have a hope that is patient, that can wait—as Joseph did. We need a hope that knows how to suffer through difficult situations with a humble spirit. We need a hope that is sure God will answer our genuine need. That is trusting faith. That is mature faith.

HOW PRAYER GETS WINGS

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

If I am not mistaken you have often experienced the fact that fasting gives devotion and confidence to prayer. Think how intimately they are joined. As it is written, “brother helps brother so that both are comforted”. Prayer demands the virtue of fasting, and fasting gains the grace of prayer but prayer sanctifies fasting and offers it to the Lord. What profit do we get from fasting if it remains on earth? We must lift up fasting, then, on the wing of prayer.

But one wing may not be enough. The prayer of the just, says Scripture, pierces the heavens. Our fasting needs two wings, prayer and justice. What is justice but giving to each what is proper? Do not pay attention to God alone. You are also indebted to others, to those over you and those who serve with you. Perhaps you have been thinking: What do the opinions of human beings matter to me? But God is in no way pleased by anything that gives scandal to others.

Think of the phrase: “Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly!” That requires that we maintain unity, cherish peace and love one another. The proud Pharisee kept a fast and gave thanks to God but he separated himself from others. I am not like others, he said. His fasting had only one wing and so didn’t rise to Heaven. Take care that your fast has two wings.

Seek holiness and peace, without which we know that no one can please God. Join your fasting to pure intention and devout prayer that you may make an acceptable offering to the divine majesty. Mortify the flesh while maintaining unity of heart with all of the community of faith. The more efficacious prayer is the more gravely hindered it is by cowardice of spirit and excessive fear. This happens when one thinks of one’s own unworthiness as not to keep the eyes fixed on God’s kindness. God’s deep mercy calls to the depths of human misery. If iniquity is great, God’s loving kindness is infinitely greater. When your soul is troubled remember God’s mercy and be refreshed by it.

But as there is a danger that prayer will be too timid, there is likewise a danger that it be rash. I wouldn’t take away from sinners their confidence in prayer but have them pray as people who commit sin. We should pray with a contrite heart and a humble spirit, like the Publican rather than the Pharisee.

But don’t let your prayer be lukewarm. Let it flow from deep feeling. If it is lukewarm prayer grows weak in its upward flight, it falls back; it meets resistance, and far from winning grace, this deserves punishment. Prayer that is faithful, humble, and fervent will undoubtedly pierce Heaven. It will certainly not return fruitless. Be not afraid. Act boldly in your devotion and God will bring you to His Heavenly Home.

UNDERSTANDING OUR LENTEN STRUGGLE

A reflection excerpted from a homily by St. Bernard

Do you think I exaggerate when I tell how deeply I am concerned for you? But I find in myself so much reason for concern, that as I reflect on my own miserable condition, I can't help but be troubled and concerned about you. Isn't this what it means to love others as you love yourself? We are in such great danger!

The reason is that we carry the snare that can trap us in ourselves. We carry our own enemy around with us. Think of our bad habits. Something in us lusts so strongly against the spirit, constantly murmurs, is impatient of discipline and seems neither subject to reason nor inhibited by fear.

But what good does it do to point out dangers unless there is also some consolation and reason for hope to point to? What remedy can be applied to our condition? Think of the Scripture which tells us, "Your desire is under you, and you must master it." How is it that the enemy, either the devil or what we call our flesh, seems not to be able to be overcome? What arouses the impulse we call a temptation? It is our belief that some action will help us be successful or stave off discouragement or despair. See, the enemy stirs up the desire for food and puts impatient thoughts in our minds and arouses impulses that lead us astray. We can refuse, if we can see that what we long for at the moment isn't really going to bring us what we long for.

We often turn to prayer. Yet when I speak of this I seem to hear your hearts complaining that this is fruitless. We never stop praying so why do we so infrequently experience the fruits we long for? What do we do in prayer? We tell God, and so tell ourselves, that the things of God alone will bring us to the good we long for. We tell ourselves that the things that tempt us are not really means to what we long for. The Scriptures tell us, Judge with right judgement. Right judgment is judgement based on faith. Faith tell us what is truly important and necessary for attaining the good we long for, and have chosen in Christ.

Faith calls us to "delight in the Lord". In prayer we think of spiritual delights like those of having a good conscience or of having acted chastely or having loved another without seeking one's own advantage. We know, then, what spiritual delight is. Think of delighting in the Lord and such thoughts of true delights will crowd out those of merely earthly delights. That's why we remind ourselves that delight in food and drink and sex are transitory but spiritual delight isn't. We ask God for what sustains us physically but so we may serve the Lord spiritually. We seek the lesser for the greater. There are pleasures that make us good and pleasures that ruin us and make us harm rather than love one another. Pray always for the good that helps and lifts up and lasts forever. Let prayer for spiritual virtue and good be free from pride and impurity and intent only on loving and pleasing God. Keep your mind on such things and prayer will bear its fruit as you less and less desire what harms and doesn't lead to God's Kingdom.