

THE FOURTH WEEK OF THE EASTER SEASON

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Dom John Main OSB

Sunday

OUR CALL TO BE GOOD SHEPHERDS

A reflection taken from The Names of Christ by Fr. Luis de Leon

“Jesus said, I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep!” Jesus is not only a shepherd but a shepherd such as had never existed before. To call himself the “good” shepherd indicates that he is the best shepherd of all. There are four reasons for this.

In the first place Christ was born to be our shepherd; i.e., the shepherd for the entire human race. Most shepherds are entrusted with sheep but the Son of God descended from Heaven to seek out all those who were lost and make them into a flock. He was born as a human being precisely for this reason and he hinted as much by arranging that his birth be proclaimed first to ordinary shepherds.

In the second place, what we owe to Christ is not just a matter of receiving guidance and nourishment. Yes, he protects us and leads us and shows us the way to real life, but, in fact, we were savage animals when he came. He has transformed us into sheep! He has given us a spirit of simplicity and humility and even sweetness and so transformed us inwardly and made us sheep, his sheep.

In the third place, he died for the good of his flock in a way that no other shepherds have or could. He agreed to become a wolf’s victim in order to save us from that wolf, and he shows us that those who are killed by wolves or other enemies are not dead forever. He restores even the dead to a new life.

This is shown by the fourth mark that shows he is the only perfect shepherd. Besides doing all the good things other pastors do, he made himself our nourishment. In feeding us this shepherd gives himself to us. Christ came among us and, so to speak, became so close to us as to be permeated by all that is ours—except sin. He took our life and then took us into his own life so that we would be transformed into him. We don’t just feed on Christ; we remove our-selves—let him remove us, from our old selves and take upon ourselves the qualities of Christ. We slowly become one with our Shepherd.

In reality, after his human birth, he feeds us from his spirit and his flesh. As Scripture says, ***“We wait upon you that you many give us our nourishment at the right time”***. He continues to rain nourishment upon us even after ascending to the Heavenly Father. In a thousand secret and marvelous ways Christ gives himself to us and makes that gift our food of transformation. As on earth he feeds us, so in heaven he will still be our shepherd. There he will leads us as a shepherd leads sheep to pasture and we, as his sheep, will live for endless centuries, for eternity, rejoicing in the gift of his own life.

Christ is our shepherd and our pasture. What he has already given us only foreshadows what is to come. With these gifts we can lead others to their good and true shepherd. What we have received we are to share with others who have not yet received it, and we are to so build one another up that all turn more and more wholly to Christ and so to our Heavenly Father.

Monday

SURRENDER IN TRUST

Sr Ruth Burrows ODC

At the end of her life St. Therese of Lisieux declared that she understood humility of heart. Now I am daring to say that I too have understood humility of heart. I do not say that I am humble of heart but I understand that the principal work of God is to bring us to true humility and poverty of spirit, to make us deeply aware of our nothingness so that he can give himself to us.

Everything depends on our willingness to stand in the truth, to refuse to escape from this painful revelation of self, to accept to stand naked before the living God. At this time, I had been far from being grounded in trust, that trust which casts itself into the arms of God, but I was growing towards it.

After a fall, when there was some revelation of my weakness, feeling utterly wretched, when my instinct was to sulk spiritually, or at least be sluggish, through disgust with myself, in returning to God with full heart, recalling the story of the prodigal, and that the father had embraced him in his smelly rags and that it was the father who cleansed and adorned him, I would say to him “I ask you to love me all the more, to do more and more for me because I have failed”.

This quiet inward working, this gentle returning to God in rain, fog, and sleet has gone on unremittingly. Although I might express in words bitterness, despair, utter frustration, my heart spoke lovingly to God. Often, I would be gripped in emotional rebellion, but my heart would lie in suffering acceptance at Gods feet.

By the grace of God, I was able to take Therese literally. I knew that what she said was pure truth. What is more, I was that soul so much weaker than herself and I turned with trust to God as she advised. He always answers my trust and will answer it still more.

O, Therese, I have understood. All my being understands. Surrender. Poverty of spirit.... This is God’s grace in me.

Tuesday

SHARING OUR TASTE FOR GOD

A reflection by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

Like new-born infants crave spiritual milk that you may grow up to salvation, if indeed you have tasted how sweet the Lord is! Why are we encouraged to want this if we have already tasted how sweet the Lord is? You have seen and reflected on Jesus Christ on his cross and have seen his arms outstretched as if to embrace you. You have seen this with the eyes of your heart and so seen it more clearly than many did when they saw it with their eyes. So, you have tasted how sweet, humble, meek, merciful, gentle and caring the Lord is. And you have tasted this at the table of his Body and Blood. He willed that it should always be before our eyes, and that it should not only be our ransom but our food.

What are we to do now that we have tasted so much? We are to go with the holy women to the tomb. We are to go with the aromatic oils of devotion and love. We are to seek our Lord with faith and devotion and charity. These are the ointments we have to bring it we expect to find the Risen Christ.

How wonderful it is that Christ willed that women first learn of his resurrection and announce it to the other disciples. It falls to women to provide milk to little ones. They, and we, experience such milk in Christ's great compassion. And we who see and taste this must keep craving it! Cave it and taste it. Taste the faith which works through love. Draw this love from your remembrance of Christ's resurrection. Let's become like new-born infants. Infants have innocence and simplicity. Once we have put off the old person, left behind all that we were which was not of God, once we have allowed ourselves to be crucified with Christ, and so found ourselves rising to a new life with Christ, we are ready to share all that we have received. This is what Christ commanded the women to do. He commanded all the disciples to do it, as he commands us.

What is it that we do when we gather for prayer? Isn't our prayer in common a way of sharing Christ Risen? What is it that we do when we encourage one another to rise up and come to prayer? Isn't our mutual encouragement a way of sharing Christ Risen? What do we do when we help each other do the work that gives us bread to eat? Isn't our work and its product a sharing given us by God so that we might in turn share with others?

Let all that we do be a way of sharing God's gifts to us. This is what God called Adam and Eve to do in the beginning of our race. Now the New Adam and his Church help us to join in the sharing of the Bread that comes down from Heaven. That bread is Christ become one with us so that our lives may be offered to God as the life of Christ. You have tasted and seen that the Lord is good. Share what you have tasted as you share your delight.

Wednesday

SMALL THINGS

Dorothy Day

Today we are not content with little achievements, with small beginnings. We should look to St Teresa, the Little Flower, to walk her little way, the way of love. We should look to St Teresa of Avila, who was not content to be like those people who proceeded with the pace of hens about Gods business, but like those people who on their own account were greatly daring in what they wished to do for God. It is we ourselves that we have to think about, no one else. That is why the saints worked. They paid attention to what they were doing, and if others were attracted to them by their enterprise, why, well and good. But they looked to themselves first of all.

Do what comes to hand. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. After all God is with us. It shows too much conceit to trust in ourselves, to be discouraged at what we ourselves can accomplish. It is lacking faith in God to be discouraged. After all we are going to proceed with his help. We offer him what we are going to do. If he wishes it to prosper it will. We must depend solely on him. As St Ignatius says work as though everything depended on us and pray as though everything depended on God.

I suppose it is a grace not to be able to have time to take or derive satisfaction in the work we are doing. In what time I have my own impulse is to self-criticism and examination of conscience, and I am constantly humbled at my own imperfections and at my halting progress. Perhaps I deceive myself here too, and excuse my lack of recollection. But I do know how small I am and how little I can do and so I beg you, Lord, to help me for I cannot help myself. Help me to be content with little achievements, with small beginnings.

Thursday

LAST TESTAMENT

Blessed Christian de Cherge, OCSO

If it should happen one day – and it could be today – that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to encompass all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country. I ask them to accept that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure. I ask them to pray for me: for how could I be found worthy of such an offering? I ask them to be able to associate such a death with the many other deaths that were just as violent, but forgotten through indifference and anonymity.

My life has no more value than any other. Nor any less value. In any case, it has not the innocence of childhood. I have lived long enough to know that I share in the evil which seems, alas, to prevail in the world, even in that which would strike me blindly. I should like, when the time comes, to have a clear space which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down.

I could not desire such a death. It seems to me important to state this. I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if this people I love were to be accused indiscriminately of my murder. It would be to pay too dearly for that which will, perhaps, be called the “grace of martyrdom”, to owe it to an Algerian, whoever he may be, especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam. I know the scorn with which Algerians as a whole can be regarded. I know also the caricature of Islam which a certain kind of Islamism encourages. It is too easy to give oneself a good conscience by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideologies of the extremes. For me, Algeria and Islam are something different: They are a body and a soul. I have proclaimed this often enough, in the sure knowledge of what I have received in Algeria, in the respect of believing Muslims-finding there so often that true strand of the Gospel I learned at my mother’s knee, my very first Church.

My death, clearly, will appear to justify those who judge me naïve or idealistic. But these people must realize that my most avid curiosity will then be satisfied. This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills-immense my gaze in that of the Father, to contemplate with him his children of Islam just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of his passion, filled with the gift of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and to refashion the likeness, delighting in the differences.

For this life given up, totally mine and totally theirs, I thank God, who seems to have wished it entirely for the sake of that joy in everything and in spite of everything. In this thank you which is said for everything in my life from now on, I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today and you my friends of this place, along with my mother and father, my brothers and sisters and their families-the hundredfold granted as was promised.

And you also, the friend of my last moment. You were not aware of what you were doing. Yes, for you also I wish this thank you -and this adieu-to commend you to the God whose face I see in yours.

And may we find each other, happy “good thieves” in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both. Amen. Inch Allah

Friday

Memorial of Blessed Christian deCharge' THE MANY WAYS OF WALKING WITH JESUS

A reflection developed from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

A group of women went to the tomb of Jesus but didn't find him there. They met him as they went home. Two disciples were going to their home at Emmaus and met Jesus as they walked along but didn't recognize him. How can I meet Jesus and also recognize him? Think first of how many different walks in life there are and remember that all of them can bring us into Jesus' company.

There are people who devote themselves to obtaining justice for all, and there are those who devote themselves to contemplation. Jesus deigns to meet and manifest himself to those concerned with justice just as he does to those who contemplate. Many of you remember that you experienced such a meeting with Jesus. Maybe you sought him at an altar but he unexpectedly came to you while you were working. You tried to draw near and hold onto his feet but you couldn't, not until you ceased to be sparing of your own feet and obeyed God's command to work in a particular way. Ordinarily work demands a lot of coming and going and some think this gets in the way of Jesus walking with us. Yet Jesus didn't spare his feet from working and walking any more than from the nails. He did all this on our account. And with Jesus every walk is work of love. Isn't every walk in life, when one is genuinely seeking Christ, a work of love?

I ask all of you who have had such experiences: Wasn't your heart burning in you on account of Jesus when he spoke to you on as you were doing this or that and so helped you see the practical and spiritual meaning the Scriptures had for you? Let those who have experienced this remember. Let those who haven't believe what they hear and pray to be given this grace of experience.

We are still celebrating Easter. Let the spirit of each one of us rise and come to life, whether by watchfulness in prayer or by constancy in work. This is how we are to experience a share in Christ's resurrection. The first sign of life's return after illness is energy and diligence in action. Its perfect realization is contemplation. So, there is, so to speak, a growth in our resurrection, as though it took place by stages. For instance, we work and then we contemplate.

Remember the story of the child Elijah raised to life. First his flesh grew warm and then he yawned and finally he opened his eyes. First, our hearts find new warmth and a new hope that can carry us beyond previous torpors. Second, we meditate on what is happening to and within us and we experience a kind of flame in our hearts. Third, we experience a hunger, one for God's justice say, and want it to be realized in a love that seeks to supply everyone with what the need to walk and find Christ. When we open our hearts under the influence of God's Spirit, we long to do God's commandments in love. The first sign of life is the good works done by love. The second sign is the longing for prayer and God's closer presence. The third is contemplation. Love alone can recognizes the Lord and so it alone leads to contemplation.

Saturday

FINDING OUR ROOTS IN GOD

Dom John Main OSB

What we have to discover for ourselves is that God is the root from which we spring. He is the ground of our being. The most elementary sanity requires that we live out of this rootedness. Living our lives rooted in Christ, knowing ourselves rooted in him, as a daily experience in our daily return to meditation, means that we enter into a radical stability that is impervious to change, to passing, ephemeral contingency. In the silence of our meditation, we gain an experience as beyond contingency. We know who we are and that we are in God and that in him we discover our essential identity and unique meaning. The wonder of Christian prayer is that what we discover is that we have meaning in and for God. The astonishingly, barely believable thing about Christian revelation is that our meaning is that when we are in harmony with him, we reflect back to him all the brilliance of his own glory, all the fulness of his own self communication.

St. Paul tells us “in him you have been brought to completion”. The Christian mystery summons us into the divine milieu taking us to our own appointed place within it. The fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ and Christ dwells in us. In his indwelling we find our own completion. To be complete as individuals we must live this mystery not just intellectually, not just emotionally but with our full being. What the New Testament cries out to us is that the fullness of being we are being summoned to, dwells within our being as it is now and is realized when our being and the being of God come into a full resonant harmony. Meditation invites us to enter the resonant harmony of God.

Beyond a certain point language always fails us. But we have to try to use language to direct our attention towards the mystery and its dept. God is real. Sainthood, wisdom, are simply names for reality. We discover by daily fidelity in our meditation that godliness is sanity and sanctity. It all flows from the full power of God’s love. Each of us is summoned to discover that this godliness flows freely in the depts of our own heart.

The mystery of our relationship with God is one that embraces such a wide canvas that only by developing our capacity for awe filled and reverential silence will we ever be able to appreciate even a fraction of its wonder. We know that God is intimately with us and we know he is infinitely beyond us. It is only through deep and liberating silence that we can reconcile the polarities of this mysterious paradox. And the liberation we experience in silent prayer is precisely liberation from the inevitably distorting effects of language when we begin to experience Gods intimate and transcendent dominion within us.