

THE SIXTH WEEK IN THE EASTER SEASON

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 Sr Teresa Benedicta of the Cross O.C.D.
 (Edith Stein)

Sunday

LOVE OVERCOMES ALL SIN

A reflection developed from two homilies by St. Augustine

We are all friends and travelers who are making our way as fast as we can toward our Heavenly Homeland. As long as we hold onto our hope of reaching it we are all right; if we despair we lose our strength and collapse. Yet it is God's will that we arrive at our goal. God gives us nourishment for our journey precisely so we will come to the safety of this homeland. Part of this nourishment comes from his Word.

Let's listen carefully to what follows: "If we claim to have fellowship with God while we are still walking in the dark, we are liars and are not practicing the truth". Now listen to this second word: "But if we walk in the light, as God is light, then we have fellowship with God and with one another". So, we must walk in the light and not in the dark. Now the dark is sin. Isn't it our sin that causes us to despair and lose the strength we need for our journey? Then listen to yet another word: "The blood of God's Son Jesus Christ will cleanse us from every transgression".

We have had our past sins forgiven. But all too often, even after that guilt has been taken away, we fall again into sin. We live in the midst of a world filled with temptations to rely on ourselves and that is what we try to do when we sin. All of us must admit our condition so we may be healed by one who never changes, who has always existed and always will, and who everlastingly loves us. Listen to Scripture again: "If we deny our sins, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth doesn't abide in us". But if you enter into the truth, first by confessing yourself to be a sinner, then the truth abides in you. Your life may not yet be perfectly free from faults, since there are still sinful moments of attempted self-reliance, but you have begun to see the true light. Scripture says: "If we confess our transgressions, the one who is faithful and just will forgive them and cleanse us of all our iniquity".

What is the basis of our hope, in spite of the weakness and hesitancy we find in ourselves? It is love. Confession of our guilt comes first but it is accepted by love. It is said of charity that it covers a multitude of sin. The charity is not simply that of God. It is the charity we show to others. Sin comes of an absence of charity. Where there is charity, we don't have to try to depend on ourselves but can turn always to the one who loves us. When we turn to our God, and to our Savior Jesus Christ, we are given the gift of loving others as Christ loves us. Turning to them is an act of love and from it comes endlessly more love.

Listen to another Scripture: "This is the test by which we can be sure we know God: Do we keep his commandments?" But God's commandment is to love! Listen again to the Lord: "I give you a new commandment; love one another." We know we have been made perfect in God when we keep this commandment. The perfection of love is to do good even for your enemies. This loving transforms enemies into brothers and sisters. One who loves like this has a hope that will never fail.

Monday

KILLING THE GOLIATH WITHIN US

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Bernard

We all know the story of how David, relying completely on God, was able to kill the giant, Goliath. David was a mere youth, and there he was coming forward with only a sling and five stones to attack an armed and trained warrior of monstrous bulk protected by a shield and a helmet. David bore no armor and carried only a shepherd's staff and his sling. Zeal for God filled him and he took the insults hurled at Israel's army—God's army—personally. We marvel at his faithfulness to God and the way he overcame all fear for himself. You trust in your strength and armor, he told Goliath, but I trust in the Lord of Armies, the God of Israel. It is a wonderful story that has a spiritual application.

The fact is that each of us faces, within, a kind of giant named pride and if we are to win the victory, for ourselves and our own people, then we must trust in the Lord as David did. Pride is most dangerous because it easily leads us to rely on ourselves rather than on our God. Saul urged David either to give up or at least wear armor. But that was worldly wisdom speaking. It took what was actually David's strength to be a weakness: In admitting that he couldn't defeat Goliath by his own strength David laid hold of what seems weakness but actually is the strongest weapon, humility. He tossed away worldly resources, and even his confidence in skill with his sling and its stones, and trusted in the Lord. He was like Peter when the Lord called him to come to him walking on the water. When Peter considered the wind's intensity, the seas' depth and his body's weight he began to sink. He cried out to the Lord and the Lord saved him. So, David cried out to the Lord. We must do the same.

Besides his staff and sling David took five stones with him in his shepherd's pouch. I think of these five stones represent the five types of monitory words found everywhere in Scripture. They are words of warning, words of promise, words of love, words that invite us to imitate our God, and words of prayer. Our world is passing away but these five sorts of words never pass away. Indeed, as our world passes the words become ever more powerful and work more strongly in our minds and hearts. We must take these word-stones and put them in our pouch of memory. Reflect on how serious God's warnings are, on how great are God's promises to each of us, how great a love God shows us, and how God reinforces the impact of all these words by examples of holiness—lived words showing us how to live the other four types of words in every circumstance. Finally, God calls us to earnestness and constancy in prayer.

If you are fighting with the giant that is pride you have to overcome it with these stones—striking it as it were in the forehead and stunning it. Then you can draw closer and witness pride's weakness. Your own strength can't accomplish any of the things you sought in your pride, and its weakness when admitted leads us to God's words and shows us the humility that makes us truly strong. If you grasp that humility as your own it becomes, like Goliath's sword, a weapon you can wield so as to kill its owner. Not in our own strength but by prayer and by God's love do we triumph.

Tuesday

WHY DID YOU ABANDON ME?

Catherine De Hueck Doherty

“Father, Father why have you forsaken me?” Those words are filled with mystery and awe. How is it possible that Christ, the Son of the Father, could say such tragic things on the cross? And before that in Gethesemane, when he begged that the chalice should pass him by? How?

But to my mind it appears very simple. Christ was a man like us in all things except sin. Like any human being he cried because he was hurting. He said to his Father “I have really done everything that you want me to do “. His humanity asserted itself. I would say that in a moment of stress, he obviously experienced the darkness that we all experience.

We experience our darkness for his sake. The darkness comes to us, and we cry to the same Father “Father, Father, why have you forsaken me?”

The tragedies of the human race are many. Underneath the cross of Christ, a sea of people went back and forth. Many came just to see him dying. The torture of criminals was like a sports event those days. From his cross Christ could see that some of those people were ones he had helped. That must have pierced his soul like a sword. Mary had a sword through her soul; so did he. He turned his head a little, and what else did he see? Of his apostles he saw nothing except the dust they had kicked up in wake of their flight! Only John remained.

The people he had cured rejected him. The apostles rejected him. People yelled “Let him come down from the cross now “. This was blasphemy of course. There was something to cry about to the Father. And he did. In that tremendous cry from the cross, the whole of humankind’s pain was found.

A psychologist friend used to say to me “when you deal with emotionally depressed people, try to show them how to unite their depression with the depression of God in Gethesemane and on Calvary”

In the garden Jesus arose after prayer and came to his disciples and they were sound asleep. How would you feel about that? Suppose your friends fell asleep when you were in a depression or in a terrible bind?

So, it is not astonishing that Jesus Christ cried out. In his cry, we take courage because he lifts our cry up to himself. The Father listens to our cry as he listened to the cry of his Son. That Son died but he rose three days later. Thus, the Father showed how much he loved the Son. It is the same for us.

Wednesday

FAITH IN THE RESURRECTION

Metropolitan Anthony Bloom

Some people, while admiring the importance of the Resurrection in the experience of the apostles, wonder how this apostolic experience can have the same central significance for you; but is it enough for us simply to believe in the words of others and to found our faith on something wholly unverifiable? I would like to stress the fact that, of all the historic events in the world, the Resurrection of the Lord belongs equally to past history and to present reality. Christ, dead on the cross on one particular day, Christ risen from the tomb in his glorified, human flesh on one particular day, belong to the past as a historic fact; but Christ, once risen, living forever in the glory of the Father, belongs to the history of each day and each instant, because being alive, according to his promise, he is with us now and always.

Christian experience from this point of view is essentially attached to the event of the Resurrection, because it is the one event in the Gospels that can become part of our own personal experience. All the rest we receive from tradition, written and spoken—the account of the Crucifixion, the different events told us by Holy Scripture—but the Resurrection this we know personally, or else we are ignorant of the primordial, essential fact of the life of the Church and the Christian faith. St Simeon the New Theologian said: “How can one who knows nothing of the Resurrection in this life, expect to discover and enjoy it in his death?”. Only the experience of the Resurrection and eternal life can make the death of the body into sleep and death itself into the Gate of Life.

If such a plain statement arouses questions, demands a response, demands of you that you ask yourself whether you are within Christian experience, so much the better! Here is the central experience without which there are no Christians, there is no Christianity, without which our faith is not faith but credulity; not the certainty of things unseen but the capacity to accept the witness of others, an unverifiable witness, a witness based on nothing more than that someone has said something that seems incredible but that nevertheless, for reasons equally incredible, we are prepared to accept.

The central event of Christianity and the focus of the Gospels is the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Orthodox Church sings of the Resurrection not only on Easter night—repeating over and over again the Easter hymn “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and to those in the tombs he has given life”—but every Sunday. Without the Resurrection there would be no church and no Christian faith.

Thursday

FOOLS FOR CHRIST

Bishop Porter Taylor

The hard edge of the Gospel is that we are called to be fools for Christ. The Good News of Jesus Christ is always foolish to the world. St Paul teaches that it is folly and a stumbling block. The world cannot make sense of Jesus. His notion of blessedness seems upside down. Jesus invites us to the foolishness of the Gospel. He teaches that losing is finding, the last shall be first, dying is living. To many these appear foolish.

So, we are invited to be Holy Fools. Being a Holy Fool is part of our tradition. Jesus asks us to step out of our seriousness, out of our properness, into the freedom of Gospel foolishness. In inviting us to let go of our seriousness he wants us to embrace the joy of the Good News. He does not want us to be life-killing Pharisees who are always correct but never alive.

Of course, St Francis of Assisi is the one who elevated Holy Foolishness to new heights. He gave up all his possessions. He walked to the Holy Land to ask the Sultan to stop fighting the Crusaders. Francis stood reality on its head so that he could see the world right side-up. And he called for his friars to be jesters, jokers, so that they could truly experience the joy of being alive.

But it remains hard to be a fool. It does not come easy to us. Deep down most of us are reluctant to be like Francis, we want security, prestige and autonomy. Sometimes, when we lose them, we are forced into accepting the foolishness of the Gospel.

For Christianity is like a good but foolish joke. You either get it or you don't. The foolish message is that the Cross is the door to life. The more our safe, inflated, private ego dies; the more we find Christ in us. The joke is that death always leads to life.

Friday

CELEBRATING THE LOVE OF THOSE WHO LEAD US

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Aelred of Rivaulx

The title “Abbot” comes from a word meaning “Father”. The fatherhood in question is not physical, however, but spiritual. If we clearly see and understand the benefits that the Lord has bestowed on us through our Holy Father Benedict, we would see how greatly monks should love their abbot and spiritual father. Through the ministry of Moses, the Lord led the Jews out of Egypt, and through the ministry of Benedict he led us all out of this present world. The ancient Jews were enslaved to Pharaoh but we were under slavery to the devil and in bondage to our own vices. Have you forgotten what you suffered in order to follow Benedict and your abbots after you decided to leave all things to follow Christ?

Think of the beating people take trying to gain riches or property. Think of what people suffer trying to satisfy their appetites for pleasure and excitement. How painful is it when all these desires and the unprincipled and disgraceful ways of satisfying them are made public! Perhaps some of you had to feel such pain and shame. Compare this with the spiritual delight you often experience as you follow Christ and the satisfaction you feel when you overcome evil desires within you. Moses gave the Jews a law so they might enter the Promised Land, but Benedict gave us a law showing the way to enter Heaven itself as heirs of God’s Kingdom.

We have been called to give up professions, churches, riches, families and all else that gets in the way of serving God. You answered that call, but perhaps you then heard within you a voice that led you back toward former things. Who helps us reject such temptations and helps us to stay on the path to God and God’s Kingdom? Isn’t it the abbots who help us listen to Blessed Benedict and God’s call? The first degree of humility is fear of the Lord, so you have been taught. How could you have given yourself, and all you had, if you hadn’t heard a Father’s voice helping you make the journey that gives this gift? Again, the second step in humility is not to love one’s own will nor delight in satisfying the desires of the flesh. This is how we avoid our former vices and enter into virtue. Who helped you persevere? Finally, the third step of humility is to love God in a way that leads you to subject yourself to your abbot in all obedience.

Anyone who chooses to scorn riches, honors and amusements, who decides to live simply, soberly, chastely and religiously, is made fun of by worldly people. So, you have had to journey into the desert and then find a worthy guide to lead you while you lived there. Offer your sacrifice to God, was the motto. Put to death within yourself all that the world loves. Love to be insignificant for Christ’s sake, to be a pauper, to be rejected by many.

This is why you must love and follow your abbot, as spiritual guide. We do it so that we may come to the eternal place of happiness. When we celebrate the anniversaries of holy abbots that is what we are celebrating. Rejoice in the goodness of our Lord Jesus Christ and all you have received of help and comfort and mercy and love as you have followed Christ, and Benedict, and the abbots God’s providence has sent you as guides and helpers.

Saturday

WITHOUT BARRIERS IN THE WORLD:

Sr Teresa Benedicta of the Cross O.C.D.

(Edith Stein)

One with God... If Christ is the Head and we are the members in the Mystical Body, then we relate to each other as member to member and we are all one in God, a divine life. If God is in us and we are all one in God, a divine life. If God is in us and if he is love, then it cannot be otherwise but to love one another. Therefore, our love for our brothers and sisters is the measure of our love for God. But it is different from a natural, human love which affects this one or that who may be related to us, or who may be close to us because of the bonds of temperament or common interests. The rest are "strangers" who don't concern us, perhaps even by their presence annoy us, so that love is kept as far away as possible.

For the Christian there is no "strange human being". They are in every instance the 'neighbor' whom we have with us and is most in need of us. It makes no difference whether they are related or not, whether we like them or not, whether they are morally worthy of help or not. The love of Christ knows no bounds, it never ceases, it never withdraws in the face of hatred or foul play. Jesus came for the sake of sinners, and not for the righteous. If the love of Christ lives in us then we do as he did and seek after the lost sheep.

Natural love seeks to possess the beloved entirely and as far as possible not to share her. Christ came to win back lost humankind for the Father: whoever loves with his love will want people for God and not for themselves. Of course, that is the surest way to possess them forever; for wherever we have entrusted a person to God, then we are one with them in God, whereas the craving to overpower sooner or later always leads to loss. It is true of the others soul as for one's own and for every external possession. The one who is evidently out to win and to possess loses; the one who hands over to God wins.