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Sunday

GOD LOVES & BLESSES OUR ORDINARY LIFE

A reflection by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller

In a passage from the opening chapters of the Book of Wisdom we are told that God doesn't rejoice in the destruction of the living. The Gospels make this even clearer by showing us the tender and determined way Jesus went about restoring life and health, even under seemingly impossible circumstances. Think of this in relation to Sunday's Gospel reading.

We find Jesus claiming needy and sick people as his own. He went to the sick daughter of a synagogue official, and in the process healed a woman who had been sick for many years. The woman had a long-continuing hemorrhage and had come and touched him without saying anything. But Jesus was aware that power had gone out from him and so looked for her until she identified herself. This required that he ignore or overcome several customs and taboos in a way we could easily miss. You see, what she did, and what he did to the little girl, made him ceremonially "unclean". That meant he wasn't supposed to enter a synagogue or the Temple or to pray liturgically or publicly. It wasn't his purpose to fly in the face of tradition or Mosaic Law, he simply acted lovingly and spontaneously to help two women, and he was willing to defend what he did.

When the hemorrhaging woman touched him, she made him "unclean". When he touched the body of the dead girl he made himself "unclean". Twice over he became "unclean" in less than half an hour. That was why the woman was afraid when Jesus looked around to identify her. She had made a holy man "unclean" and was afraid of what would happen when Jesus drew public attention to it. But notice that Jesus didn't criticize her or "correct" her. He praised her faith! That, he said, was what cured her rather than merely touching his clothes.

Struggling against illness and working to get better are good actions. The Lord was happy to be involved in them. He is still pleased to be involved in our like efforts. We need to believe in the power of miracles.

Notice that as soon as Jesus raised the little girl to life, he told her parents to give her something to eat. He thought of her human needs. Notice too, that once he had raised the girl, he wanted people to settle down and go on helping each other in their regular family life. Jesus was blessing our ordinary human existence in making it possible for two individuals to experience the normal joys of life. Recall what the Book of Wisdom told us: God loves life, ordinary life, and wants the creatures of his world to be healthy and wholesome.

To enjoy life we have to share, and Jesus shows us ways of doing that. A selfish person isn't a happy one. Such a person lacks a quality that is part of "wholeness" and of belonging to the human family as well as a particular family. This is essential to being one of God's People. Don't miss your opportunities to do this.

Monday

PETER AND PAUL, FAITHFUL CONTRASTS

Florence Morgan Gillman

Peter and Paul might be surprised to see how Christians throughout the centuries have linked them as THE two great pillars of the Church. Peter symbolizes the power of authority and the mission to the Jewish believers, while Paul, seen as the greatest earlier missionary, represents the extraordinary spread of faith to the Gentiles.

The Church of Rome has claimed these two men as its founding apostles since tradition says they were both martyred there during Nero's persecution. Both Peter and Paul are said to be buried in Rome, beneath the two basilicas that bear their respective names. Yet these two first-century men could hardly have been less alike.

Peter was a Galilean fisherman from Capernaum and probably not literate. His knowledge of the Hebrew Bible would have come from hearing Pharisees teaching in the local synagogue. He was married, living like most people among his extended family. His was a fisherman's humble life, only to be changed when another Galilean summoned him saying "Follow me".

Paul, in vivid contrast to Peter, was an urbanite from the vibrant city of Tarsus. He was well educated, also learning his family's tentmaking trade. Paul knew both Greek and Aramaic and studied in Jerusalem with a famous Pharisee, Gamaliel. When Paul set out for Damascus, he had no idea he would encounter the resurrected Jesus on the way. When he followed Jesus' call, he probably did not imagine it would lead to martyrdom in Rome.

Peter's and Paul's paths, at least as far as we can piece their lives together, only occasionally crossed during their respective ministries. We see them sometimes arguing and sometimes agreeing. In their different ways each remained faithful in their witness to the Lord. They are a fascinating study in contrasts, yet a profound reminder of the great truth they shared: each proceeded forward along a road he could never have envisioned, faithful until the last destination.

Tuesday

ASPECTS OF LOVE

Fr Laurence Freeman OSB

There is a very close relationship between the way we imagine or what we think of God, and the way we experience God. The problem for many people is that our image of God is related not to experiences of love, of joy, or of union, but it's related to experiences of authority and punishment. A young child is taught to think of God as a super parent. Often when we speak of God as Father, we are presenting an image of a person in the family who does the correction, who does the discipline. Where there is this kind of relationship, there is usually fear.

What we learn to do in meditation is to let go of all the images of God that have formed in us, and recover the child's capacity to experience God fully, the child whose experience is not controlled by concepts. This is why Jesus says that in order to enter the kingdom, which is the direct experience of God, we must become like a little child.

Meditation constantly teaches that we must let go of our concepts in order to love God. This is a lesson we learn through all human relationships. To love we must let go: we must move beyond the image of the other person that may have formed itself in our minds in order to find the reality. A relationship can only be deep and enduring if we are moving beyond the image to the reality_ if we are letting go of the person we love. We cannot be united without this experience of renunciation.

We are images of God, and the image of God is made powerfully visible in Jesus. This Jesus reflects to us who we really are. He is the mirror, as it were, of our true self, the image of the invisible God as St Paul describes him.

We can only know God by love. This is the great teaching of the whole Christian tradition. God cannot be contained in any thought, or in any mental or legal system, or in any place, in any ritual, in any external form. But God can be known by love, and therefore we must learn how to love God.

Learning to love ourselves and others are steps on the way to loving God. In this way we are taught how to love God. It is by loving that we discover who God really is. St John teaches "Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God because God is love ". When we meditate, we are asked how we still see God; it is this deepest belief and deepest feeling of our life, that shapes everything we do and everything we are.

Wednesday

HOPE IN THE LORD AT EVERY MOMENT & EVERYWHERE

A reflection adapted from a sermon by St. Peter Chrysologus

Every Gospel passage can be very helpful, both in coping with the trials of our present life in Christ and transforming us so we will be capable of rejoicing in living the life to come. That means every part of the Gospel offers us hope. This is made very clear by the readings at the Eucharist, especially on Sundays. They teach us that we needn't seek special places or times so that the Lord can help us; we can find him at every moment and in every circumstance.

Think of the story of the synagogue official whose daughter was dying. He came to Jesus and did homage and pleaded with him to come and lay his hand on the girl so she would get well and live. Now compare this person with the centurion who simply sent word to Jesus and asked only that he give the needed command to heal his slave. No special gesture or special coming of Christ is needed, at least not by God or his Christ. When we seek some special sign of Christ's presence, we are confessing only the weakness of our faith.

Whenever we turn our heart and mind to Jesus we are in his presence. Jesus often tried to teach people this. There is no need to go to God in a special place or have God do some special thing in order to obtain grace and healing. One needs only to believe that God is everywhere present, and in the whole of his being. We need only believe that God can do all things, effortlessly and by a simple word of command. Indeed, the Lord wants to gift us with such faith.

One help to doing this is provided by Gospel stories. Think of the times when Jesus put death to flight by a word. He didn't need to touch a dead body, though he often did when it was there before him. God gives life itself by a mere command and without the need of anything special by way of work or word.

Probably the synagogue official who pleaded for his daughter thought that since she had not yet grown cold the soul was still there and if Jesus came right away he could prevent it from departing from her body. In his ignorance the man thought Christ couldn't raise his daughter unless he touched her. But what is death to the creator of life? It is a kind of falling asleep to this world only. So when Jesus did come he told those mourning that the girl was asleep only.

God can restore life and life-giving warmth to limbs that have died more quickly than we can warm them by rubbing them.

Times and spaces don't limit God or God's exercise of power. You may want many things from God. You think you don't receive them because you haven't gone to a special place or God hasn't done a special sign. Perhaps, however, God is telling you that what you want isn't appropriate now. Let your faith itself cast off its limitations. Without doubting, ask God for what you need and don't doubt that God will give it to you if it is really useful—for this life and the life to come. Ask, that is, in unqualified trust in God's love. You will receive whatever is for your genuine good in this life or in the next

Thursday

OBEDIENCE, HOLINESS AND LOVE

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

The Gospel endeavors to describe how believers are conformed to Jesus. In the first place, it involves obedience to Jesus' commands. The New Covenant, ratified by the blood of Christ, entails a new law. John, for instance, doesn't mention the institution of the Eucharist as the mystery of the New Covenant, probably because it was already so well-known, but recalls the command of mutual love modelled by Christ's washing of his disciples' feet.

Jesus gives us the example of laying down his life for his friends and that of serving others in the lowliest and most ordinary ways by washing others' dirty feet. Obedience to these commands brings about an interior conformity, an inward likeness to Jesus—in our attitudes and values—and so we are united to Jesus the way a branch is united with the vine it grows on. We are to inhabit Jesus' spiritual world. We are to make Jesus' motivations our motivations. These are the profound origins of Jesus' love.

You can perhaps see that we have to take literally some things that we tend to look on as only symbolic. We have believed we live in Jesus, literally, and that we live in the Father, literally, and that this happens by the power of the Spirit, literally. Thus, as disciples we become dwelling places, temples, for God—Father, Son and Spirit. The result is being holy, as Jesus is holy. That's the goal.

That holiness flowers in our love for one another, and for everyone. God's holiness is God's innermost reality. Jesus commands us, "Be holy as your Heavenly Father is holy!" Do we take that literally? Better, can we dare to take that literally? If we do, dwelling in the Father and Son and Spirit becomes a missionary compulsion and we have to share what God has given us. We do it in any way our circumstances allow.

Holiness causes us to seek communion. The communion of believers with one another springs from this shared divine and Trinitarian holiness. It is expressed in a communitarian life that seeks acted out unity. Unity becomes a vivid testimony of the love that unites Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That love draws the world to faith and to putting all hope in God. We see what God invites us to hope for and we want it. But we don't want it just for ourselves but for the entire human world. We are sharing the mission Jesus received from the Heavenly Father because we are one with and in Jesus. This is the fruit of obedience flowering in holiness and engendering love.

Friday

THOMAS THE TWIN

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI

Thomas' name derives from a Hebrew word meaning "paired, twin ". We first meet him when Jesus, at a critical moment in his life, decided to go to Bethany to raise Lazarus, thus coming dangerously close to Jerusalem. On that occasion Thomas said to his fellow disciples "Let us go also, that we may die with him". His determination to follow the Master is truly exemplary and offers us a valuable lesson: it reveals his total readiness to stand by Jesus, to the point of identifying his own destiny with that of Jesus and of desiring to share with him the supreme trial of death.

When the Gospels speak of following, it means that where he goes, the disciple must go too.

A second intervention by Thomas is recorded at the Last Supper. On that occasion, predicting his own imminent departure, Jesus announced that he was going to prepare a place for his disciples so that they could be where he is found. It is then that Thomas intervenes, saying "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?". In fact, with this remark he places himself at a rather low level of understanding; but his words provide Jesus with the opportunity to pronounce his famous definition "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life". This is a revelation to Thomas but it is valid for all of us and for every age. We can stand beside Thomas in spirit and imagine that the Lord is also speaking to us, just as he spoke to him.

At the same time, his question also confers on us the right to ask Jesus for explanations. We often do not understand him, so we need to be brave and frank in our prayer to ask the Lord to help us to understand. Thus, we place ourselves in the trusting attitude of someone who expects light and strength from the One able to provide them.

Then, there is the proverbial scene of doubting Thomas that occurred eight days after Easter. He refuses to believe that Jesus appeared in his absence. The next time, when Thomas is present, Jesus invites him to touch his wounds. Thomas reacts with the most splendid confession of faith in the whole New Testament "My Lord and my God ".

The Apostle Thomas' case is important to us for three reasons: First ,because it comforts us in our insecurity; second, because it shows us that every doubt can lead to an outcome brighter than any uncertainty; and lastly ,because the words that Jesus addressed to him remind us of the true meaning of mature faith and encourage us to persevere, despite the difficulty ,along the journey of discipleship.

Saturday

HOW PRAYER UNDERPINNED AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE

Fr Stephen Lynch

Prayer played an important part in the American struggle for independence. The First Continental Congress comprised of delegates from all the colonies except Georgia, met for the first time in September 1774. In a letter to his wife, John Adams described the spiritual backdrop as the colonies were about to launch the Revolutionary War for Independence.

“When the Congress met, Mr. Cushing made a motion that it should be opened with prayer. Some opposed this because we were so divided in religious sentiment, some Episcopalians, some Quakers, some Anabaptists, some Presbyterians, and some Congregationalists. How could we all join in the same act of worship?”

Mr. Samuel Adams rose and said he was no bigot, and could hear a prayer from any gentleman of piety and virtue who was at the same time a friend of his country. He moved that Mr. Duce, an Episcopal clergyman, might read prayers to Congress the next morning. The motion was seconded and passed in the affirmative”.

Adams continued “The next morning the Reverend Duce appeared with his Episcopal vestments and read Psalm 85. I never saw a greater effect produced upon an audience. It seemed that heaven had ordained that psalm to be read that morning.

George Washington was kneeling there, alongside him Patrick Henry, James Madison, and John Hancock. By their side, bowed in reverence the Puritan patriots of New England, who at that moment had reason to believe that an armed soldiery was wasting their humble households. They prayed fervently for America, for Congress, for the Province of Massachusetts, and especially for the town of Boston. And who can realize the emotions with which they turned imploringly to heaven for divine help. It was enough to melt a heart of stone. I saw the tears gush into the eyes of the old, grave, pacifist Quakers of Philadelphia.”

Diverse as it was, the spirituality of the First Continental Congress gave the initial spiritual encouragement that was needed on the road to American independence. The First Continental Congress proved to be an inspiring example of the fraternal unity which comes through devout prayer.

On July 4, 1776 the United States claimed independence from Britain, and our democratic republic was born.