

TWENTY-THIRD WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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Sunday

WHAT WORDS ARE WE TO SPEAK TO OTHERS?

A reflection based on a sermon by Fr. Lawrence of Brindisi

Jesus, for unknown reasons, avoided Jewish Galilee and went into Gentile territory. Even there he was known and people brought the sick to him. Everyone was astounded by his power to heal. Mark's Gospel tells us "they were beside themselves". The only reaction they could think of is preserved in words that we too should speak whenever we think of all our Savior has done for us: "He has done everything well!" Genesis says that God completed the creation and "saw all that he had made and that it was very good". What could we expect? "A good tree bears good fruit; no good tree can bear bad fruit!" It is clear that we must unite ourselves wholeheartedly with the throng of Gentile in saying, "He had done all things well; He has made the deaf hear and the dumb speak". Of course, we also know that Jesus is divine as well as human. We more or less expect him to do things that only God can do. But that isn't an adequate response to Jesus or his works. He doesn't want only our praise but wants us to tell others about him in a way that will open not only their eyes but their hearts to his word and his love.

Doing a good deed is not quite the same thing as doing it well. Many do good deeds but don't do them well; they may help the poor but not (e.g.) in a respectful or loving way. Even a hypocrite may do good deeds, but for the wrong reasons. Yet everything that God does is not only good but done well. "The Lord is just in all his ways and holy in all his deeds; with wisdom you have done them all, O Lord"! These confessions of praise call to us to imitate Jesus.

God did all this for our sake and out of love for us. He has done it in order to show us how we are to help one another. In Jesus, God's self-giving is like that of good spouse giving themselves to one another. We are to be good spouses not only to God but for one another. Again, Jesus is our good shepherd, but a shepherd can't make the same gift of self to sheep as one spouse can to the other. The gift can't be as complete or made with the love and tenderness.

We aren't to care for one another as though we were caring for sheep, or even for very dear children. We are to treat one another as equals in dignity and worthy of equal respect and care. We are to love even as God has shown us in Jesus how to love another. The metaphor of spousal self-giving is intended to show us how much we have to be grateful for, and how deeply we are loved and treasured. Scripture says God does this so that we might "know him". God wants us to experience his love just as one spouse experiences the other's love, and even more fully.

We aren't called to "do for one another" in a distant or cold way but in the closest and warmest way imaginable. This is part of striving to do supremely well all the good things we do for one another. God wants to say to each of us, "You have done all things well!" Come, then, spouse of God, enter into the joy of your lover and Lord. It is from that joy that we must strive to speak to others. How else can they truly "know" the Lord Jesus? The better you can see Jesus in others, and love him as He is in them, the more you will do all your deeds of love well, even very well.

Monday

FOCUSING OUR LABORS ON GOD'S KINGDOM

A reflection based on sermons by St. Pope John XXIII

Today we celebrate Labor Day.

Recall the Lord's reminder that "a laborer deserves his food" (Matt.10:10) and note that Jesus is reminding us that all work is sacred; at least if it is the work of a person who directs every effort to the good of others precisely as "child of God". Without faith in God it is impossible to achieve this, or even achieve enduring success in a this-worldly way. Faith in God calls us also to faith in ourselves. We have wonderful powers; we need to use and develop ourselves in ways that will help us better support one another in earthly and spiritual ways.

God created us in the divine image and likeness and placed us on earth to cultivate and watch over it. Our dignity is reflected in the way we carry out all aspects of this vocation. We have to avoid the dead end of selfish individualism, and that of isolating ourselves from the common effort to build up one another in human society. It means that to refuse these two efforts is more an expression of cowardice than of worldly wisdom. We can only become images and likenesses of our God in active solidarity and mutual assistance on all levels.

Jesus is God come into the world to save us. He didn't come to save us from the world, but from becoming a false self. Jesus spent most of the years of his life as an ordinary skilled worker, a manual laborer, and showed us how work ennobles us, and better as the work is done better. It is even more ennobling if we do it in a way that others can see points toward God and living better the love God has shown us in Jesus. Some do it as apostles, some as contemplatives, some writers or artists or artisans, and in various types of labor. But all this can be done in ways that directs minds and hearts to the higher community to which God calls us. Working like this makes labor an expression of mutual love and service, no matter what its product may be.

The Scriptures tell us a story about the Joseph who was sold into slavery by his own brothers so they wouldn't have to compete with him for their father's attention and concern. The Scriptures also tell us a story of Joseph the husband of Mary, who saw everything he did as a way of carrying out God's call to him to both love God and others, starting with his own family. We are called to spend ourselves like both Josephs in showing care for others and promoting justice. We must make prayer the breath and sustenance of such living. Remember Benedict of Norcia and his motto: Pray and work. All activity, whether or not we call it "work", stretches our gaze toward the city of God. There all receive their just reward and find the fulfillment of their identity as children of God, created in the image of love. God is love. That is what we are too. Chose to be love today.

Tuesday

ALL THINGS ARE MADE NEW

From the sermons of St Anthony of Crete

The law comes to an end with Christ, who leads us away from the letter of the law so as to bring us to the spirit. It is fulfilled in this, that the lawgiver himself has brought it entirely to completion, transforming the letter into the law of love. He has now made the law subject to love, and joined love to law in concord; not fusing the particular qualities of each, but in a marvelous way making light and free whatever is burdensome and servile and repressed: we are no longer to be enslaved by the elemental spirits of the world, as the apostle says, or held in the yoke of slavery to the letter of the law.

This is the summary of the benefits of Christ for us. This is the unveiling of the mystery, this is the nature made new, God and humankind, and the deification of the human nature assumed by God. But so radiant, so glorious a visitation of God to us needed some prelude of joy to introduce us to the present gift of salvation. Today's feast is such: the prelude is the birth of the Mother of God, and the concluding act is the union which is destined between the Word and human nature. A virgin is now born and suckled and molded, and is made ready to be mother of God, the king of all forever.

Justifiably then is the mystery of this day to be celebrated, since a double gain will be ours if we do so: we shall be led towards the truth, and we shall be led away from a life of slavery to the letter of the law. How will this be? Clearly, in as much as the shadow yields to the presence of the light, and grace introduces freedom in place of the letter. The present feast stands on the border between these: it joins us to the truth instead of figures, and it brings in the new in place of the old.

As we celebrate the birth of Mary, let the whole creation sing praise and dance and unite to celebrate the glories of this day. Today let there be one common feast of those in heaven and those on earth. Let everything that is, in the world and above the world, join together in rejoicing. For today a shrine is built for the Creator of the universe. The creature is newly made ready as a divine dwelling for the Creator.

Wednesday

SLAVERY LIVES ON

A talk by Pope Francis

My Jesuit confrere, Peter Claver, was a remarkable man. He left his homeland forever in 1610 to be a missionary in the colonies of the New World. By this time the slave trade had been established in the Americas for nearly 100 years and he dedicated his life to caring for those trapped in this terrible evil. During his 40 years of ministry he provided medical care to them as well as instructing and baptizing an estimated 300,000 of their number.

It would be wonderful to think that slavery was a thing of the past. Sadly, this is not so. During the Year of Mercy, I recall one of my Mercy Friday visits to a house here in Rome run by the Pope John XXIII Community for victims of human trafficking. I did not think I could find such humiliated, afflicted, and suffering women there. Truly women crucified.

I listened to the moving and very human stories of these women, some of them with their child in their arms. Afterwards I felt the need to ask forgiveness for the real torture they had to endure because of their clients, many of whom call themselves Christian.

A person can never be offered for sale. I am deeply touched by those who, in the spirit of Peter Claver, conduct the precious and courageous work of rescue and rehabilitation. This work is dangerous, because it runs the risk of possible retaliation by crime syndicates for whom these women represent an inexhaustible source of illegal and shameful profit.

If we are to combat the exploitation and humiliation of human lives effectively, we need to tell the stories behind the shocking numbers of people trafficked.

Corruption is a disease that does not stop on its own. We need to raise awareness individually and collectively about racism and slavery, and in the Church as well.

Any form of prostitution is a reduction into slavery, a criminal act, a disgusting vice that confuses love-making with venting one's instincts by torturing a defenseless woman.

It is pathological to think that a woman can be exploited like a commodity to be used and thrown away. Prostitution is a disease, a wrong way of thinking. To free these modern slaves is to continue the work of Peter Claver, and is a gesture of mercy, a duty for all people of good will. We cannot be indifferent before their cry of pain, nor can we turn away and wash our hands of the innocent blood that is shed on the roads of the world

Thursday

Contemplative Prayer

from *Open Mind, Open Heart* by Fr Thomas Keating OCSO

Contemplative prayer is a process of interior transformation, a conversation initiated by God, and leading, if we consent, to divine union. The way one sees reality changes in this process. A restructuring of consciousness takes place which empowers us to perceive, relate and respond with increasing sensitivity to the divine presence in, through, and beyond everything that exists.

Dedication to God is developed by commitment to one's spiritual practices for God's sake. Service to others is the outgoing movement of the heart prompted by compassion. It neutralizes the deep-rooted tendency to become preoccupied with our own spiritual journey and how we are doing. The habit of service to others is developed by trying to please God in what we do and by exercising compassion for others, beginning with those with whom we live. To accept everybody unconditionally is to fulfill the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. It is a practical way of bearing one another's burdens. Refusing to judge even in the face of persecution is to fulfill the commandment to love another as He has loved us and to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Anything that we perceive of God can only be a radiance of his presence and not God as He is in Himself. When the divine light strikes the human mind, it breaks down into many aspects just as a ray of ordinary light, when it strikes a prism, breaks down into the various colors of the spectrum. There is nothing wrong with distinguishing different aspects of the Ultimate Mystery, but it would be a mistake to identify them with the inaccessible Light. The attraction to let go of spiritual consolation in order to let God act with perfect freedom is the persistent attraction of the Spirit. The more one lets go, the stronger the presence of the Spirit becomes. The Ultimate Mystery becomes the Ultimate Presence.

Friday

THE CHRISTIAN VOCATION TO JOY

A reflection by G. K. Chesterton

It has sometimes been claimed that Paganism is a religion of joy and Christianity one of sorrow. That is pure nonsense! Everything human has in it both joy and sorrow; the only topic of interest here is the way joy and sorrow get balanced or divided by different beliefs. What is most interesting is that pagans take special delight in the earth but grow more and more sad as they draw nearer to the next world. What's more, their joy is about the mere fact there is life and not because of its origin or goal. To pagans the small things are sweet, as we see in ancient poetry, but the larger view leaves them bitter. Paganism is darkened with an incurable despair because everything ends.

The majority of human beings have been forced to find their joy in little things and be sad about the big ones. Nevertheless, and I offer this as my contribution to dogma, it is not native to human beings to feel this way. We humans are more ourselves when joy is the fundamental thing and grief is the superficial one. Thanksgiving seems to be the permanent pulsation of the human spirit, while pessimism is at best an emotional half day off. Joy is an uproarious labor by which all things live fully. Yet, according to the appearances grasped by pagan and agnostics, this primal need of human nature can never be fulfilled. Joy ought to be expansive; but for the agnostic it must be contractive because it can cling only to one aspect, one corner, of the world's reality. Grief ought to be for a moment; yet for the agnostic its desolation spreads through eternity.

This view of agnosticism presents what I call being born and living upside down. To the modern person the heavens are actually around the earth; the explanation is simple; the skeptic is standing on his or her head—a weak pedestal to try and stand on. On the other hand, Christianity satisfied suddenly and perfectly the ancestral human instinct to stand right side up. Its creed is born of joy; hope becomes gigantic and sadness something special and small.

The vault of heaven above us is not deaf nor the universe idiotic; its silence is not a heartless indicator of an endless and aimless world. Rather, this silence is a small like the pity-filled stillness of a sickroom. We are permitted tragedy because the energy of divine things would knock us down as in a drunken farce. Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian. Open the small book which shows us how Christianity came to be. The tremendous figure of Christ towers above all others. His pathos was almost casual; he never concealed his tears; and yet he did conceal something. It wasn't anger; he flung furniture (money changers tables) down the steps of the Temple and asked people how they expected to avoid damnation.

There was still something he hid when he went up a mountain to pray. I have sometimes fancied that it was his mirth. He saw joy would be realized and that all would end in joy and glory. Wouldn't that make you laugh and be glad?

Saturday

The day after 9/11

Audience in St Peters Square of St John Paul II

Dear Brothers and sisters,
Praise be Jesus Christ!

I cannot hold this audience without expressing my profound sorrow at the terrorist attacks which yesterday brought death and destruction to America, causing thousands of victims and injuring countless people. To the President of the United States and to all American citizens I express heartfelt sympathy.

In the face of such unspeakable horror we cannot but be deeply disturbed. I add my voice to all the voices raised in these hours to express indignant condemnation, and I strongly reiterate that the ways of violence will never lead to genuine solutions to humanity's problems.

Yesterday was a dark day in the history of humanity, a terrible affront to human dignity. After receiving the news, I followed with intense concern the developing situation, with heartfelt prayers to the Lord. How is it possible to commit acts of such savage cruelty? The human heart has a depth from which schemes of unheard-of ferocity sometimes emerge, capable of destroying the normal daily life of a people. But faith comes to our aid when words seem to fail. Christ's word is the only one that can give a response to the questions which trouble our spirit. Even if the forces of darkness appear to prevail, those who believe in God know that evil and death do not have the final say. Christian hope is based on this truth; at this time our prayerful truth draws hope from it.

With deeply felt sympathy I address myself to the beloved people of the United States in this moment of distress and consternation, when the courage of so many men and women of good will is being sorely tested. In a special way I reach out to the families of the dead and the injured and assure them of my spiritual closeness. I entrust to the mercy of the Most High, the helpless victims of this tragedy, for whom I have offered Mass this morning. May God give courage to the survivors; may he sustain the rescue workers and the many volunteers who are presently making an enormous effort to cope with such an immense emergency.

I ask you dear brothers and sisters to join me in prayer for them. Let us beg the Lord that the spiral of hatred and violence will not prevail. May the Blessed Virgin, Mother of Mercy, fill the hearts of all with wise thoughts and peaceful intentions.