

THE SIXTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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Sunday

SEEKING HEALING FOR OUR LEPROSY

A reflection from a discourse by St. Pope Paul VI

“A leper approached Jesus with a request, kneeling down as he addressed him: “If you will to do so, you can cure me.” (Mk. 1:40) Jesus’ meeting with lepers is a model and type for his meeting with every person who needs to be restored to health and to the perfection of the original divine image. Jesus acts to restore all to the communion that is the People of God. This is the path to the fullness of humanity that had been lost so long. In meeting lepers, Jesus showed himself the bearer of a new life.

For example, the Mosaic Law excluded lepers from this communion, even condemned them. It prohibited anyone from approaching them or touching them. Jesus shows himself sovereignly free with regard to this law. He touches and heals lepers. The leper’s flesh acquires the freshness of a child. A leper approached and said to him, *“If you will, you can make me clean”*, and the same thing would later happen to ten other lepers. *“Lepers are cleansed”!* This is the sign of his Messiahship Jesus gave to John the Baptist’s disciples.

Now Jesus has entrusted his own mission to his disciples. *“Preach”*, he tells them, *“that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, and cleanse lepers”*. He went on to solemnly affirm that ritual purity is completely secondary, and that what is really important and decisive for salvation is moral purity.

Christ approaches lepers and comforts them, and cures them. He meets them with a loving gesture. What he does finds its full, and mysterious, expression in the passion. Tortured and disfigured by the sweat of blood that came of his flagellation and his crowning with thorns and crucifixion, he was rejected by people he had come to help. He identified himself with lepers and those like them. The cross is the image and symbol of this.

It is as Isaiah had foreseen. Contemplating the mystery of the Servant of the Lord, Isaiah wrote: *“He had no form or comeliness... He was despised and rejected by people... He was as one from whom people hide their faces... We esteemed him stricken, struck by God and afflicted.”* It is precisely from the wounds in Jesus tortured body, and from the power of his resurrection, that life and hope gush forth for all of us who are stricken by evil and infirmity.

There are few people who have never felt rejected or excluded and so are unable to feel compassion for those who do. Many have felt struck by God on account of some secret sin. Few of us have not condemned ourselves for our inability to get rid of some vice or bad habit. We can’t look at ourselves as free of defects and so feel distanced from our God. Yet God is close to us; in Jesus God is one of us. So, the Gospel tells us to go to Jesus and humbly ask him to touch and heal us. We may not even know what needs to be healed but we know we can find what we need in Jesus. We need only believe that he can heal if he wills, and so we must go and ask him to touch us and heal us. It is faith that will save us.

Monday

Discipleship and the Cross from **The Cost of Discipleship** by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The call to follow Jesus is closely connected with Jesus' prediction of his passion. Jesus Christ must suffer and be rejected. This "must" is inherent in the promise of God- the Scripture must be fulfilled. This is the distinction between suffering and rejection. Had he only suffered, Jesus might still have been applauded as the Messiah. All the sympathy and admiration of the world might have been focused on his passion. It could have been viewed as a tragedy with its own intrinsic value, dignity and honor. However, suffering and rejection sum up the whole cross of Jesus.

In the passion Jesus is a rejected Messiah. His rejection robs the passion of its halo of glory. It is a passion without honor. Peter, the Rock of the Church, is the one who tries to prevent Christ being Christ. That shows how the very notion of a suffering Messiah was a scandal to the Church, even in its earliest days. That is not the kind of Lord it wants, and as the Church of Christ it does not like to have the law of suffering imposed on it even by its Lord. Peter's protests display his own unwillingness to suffer, and that Satan has gained entry into the Church, and is trying to tear it away from the cross of its Lord.

Jesus must therefore make it clear beyond all doubt that the "must" of suffering applies to his disciples no less than to himself. Just as Christ is Christ only in virtue of his suffering and rejection, so the disciple is only a disciple only in so far as he or she shares in the Lord's suffering, rejection and crucifixion. Discipleship means adherence to the person of Jesus, and therefore submission to the law of Christ which is the law of the cross.

Surprisingly enough, when Jesus begins to unfold this inescapable truth to his disciples, he once more sets them free to choose or reject him. For it is not a matter of course, not even among the disciples. No one will be forced, nobody will even be expected to come. Everything is left to the individual to decide: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let them take up the cross every day and follow me ". Every time the disciples are half-way on the road to discipleship, they come to another crossroad. Once more they are left free to choose for themselves, nothing is expected, nothing forced. So crucial is the demand of the present hour that the disciples must be left free to make their own choice before they are told the law of discipleship

Tuesday

DWELLING IN THE SHELTER OF GOD'S LOVE

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

We are called to dwell in the protection of God. We are told that to dwell under God's protection is to dwell in safety. We can understand best that to which we are called by considering three sorts of people who don't dwell there.

The first lacks hope, the second has given up hoping, and the third hopes in vain. Those who lack hope trust in themselves rather than God. Those who are giving up hope are those who despair of ever getting what they seek. Those who hope in vain live in sin. They flatter themselves so much with the thought of God's mercy that they never bother to amend their sinful ways. There is no love in this and that is their downfall.

The first group mentioned dwell in personal merits, the second dwells in personal woes, and the third in personal vices. What is more foolish than to dwell in a half-built house? When a person has just begun to build a dwelling place for God, that person can't act as though it were finished. That's what one does if one doesn't live in hope. That is the situation of those who think their merits are enough to bring them to God. The only people who dwell in the shelter of God's presence are those whose sole desire is to receive it and whose sole fear is that they might lose it and who ponder it carefully day by day.

Is there under heaven anything that can harm a person whom the God of Heaven has decided to protect? So, nothing better can be sought than to dwell in the protection of the God of Heaven. We are taught not only to seek God so that we may avoid evil but to seek to be with God always so that we may do good.

Be careful to pay close attention to the saying: "*The one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide under the protection of the God of Heaven; such a one will say to the Lord, You are my protector!*" This Scripture speaks of living under the protection of God and not in the presence of God. Angels rejoice in God's presence. All we ask is to be able to abide under God's protection. All I ask is to be secure in God's protection.

There is no doubt that God is everywhere. But God is in heaven in a way that makes God's presence on earth seem as nothing. So, when we pray, we say "*Our Father, who art in Heaven*". Our soul is in the whole of our body but it seems more especially to be in the head where all the senses meet. The head seems in some way to govern the other members of a person and so the person seems to dwell in the head more than in the other members. In the same way, we say the very presence of God is in Heaven and can scarcely feel the same about the protection of God as we would about God's presence. God is our protector. We long yet for God's presence. To be in God's presence we are willing to surrender everything. We are led there by a love which counts nothing as so wonderful as coming to be in God's very presence. It is for this that we hope with all our heart and strength.

Wednesday

FROM THE HUMILITY OF DUST GOD DRAWS LIFE

A reflection taken from a homily by Fr. Karl Rahner

Dust is a good subject for reflection on Ash Wednesday. It is the symbol of nothingness and so it can tell us a great deal. One prayer for accompanying the distribution of ashes comes from Genesis: "*From the earth you were taken; dust you are and to dust you shall return*". Dust has no content, no form, no shape and it blows away and finds a home nowhere. Besides Scripture is right, we are dust. We are always in the process of dying; we know we are dust! We are so easily creatures of drifting perplexity and despair easily threatens us from the door that is our anxiety.

Dust has an inner relationship, if not an essential identity, with the concept of flesh. Flesh certainly refers to the human person in the Bible. This term designates us precisely in our basic otherness from God and in our frailty, our weakness and all that separates us from the kind of life God is. All this is manifested in our sin and in death. The two assertions, "we are dust" and "we are flesh" are essentially like assertions.

But the good news of salvation rings out: "*The Word became flesh*"! God incarnate has strewn his own head with dust. The dust of the earth is the body of God. God has fallen on his face upon the earth, which with evil greed drank up his tears and his blood. We can say to God exactly what is said to us: "Remember that you are dust and in death you shall return to dust". We can tell God what we were told in Paradise because God has become what we are after Paradise. God has become flesh, flesh that suffers even unto death. God has become transitory, fleeting, unstable dust.

Ever since that moment, the sentence of terrifying judgement — Dust you are! — is changed for people of faith and love. With the dust of the earth we trace on our foreheads the sign of the cross, so that what we are in reality can be made perceptible in a sign. People of death, people of redemption, dust you are.

It can be difficult for us to avoid hating ourselves. The reason why we can trample our enemies down into the dust and make them eat dust is that we are in despair about ourselves. What we can't stand in others shows us what makes us despair about ourselves.

The judgement we heard in Paradise still has a mysterious and shocking sense. The old sense is not abolished but it descends with Christ into the dust of the earth, where it becomes an upward motion, an ascent above the highest heaven. "*Remember that you are dust!*" In these words, we are told everything that we are. We are a nothingness that is filled with eternity. We are death that teams with life. We are futility that redeems. We are dust that is God's life forever! We are what is most humble and most exalted. Indeed, it is from the first that the second comes.

Thursday

FINAL SANITY

from Wisdom in the Waiting by Rev. Phyllis Tickle

The forty penitential weekdays and six Sundays that follow Mardi Gras and precede Easter are the days of greatest calm in the Church's year. Since by long centuries of custom the date of Easter is annually determined from the first Sunday after the full moon on or after March 21, the intertwining of physical and spiritual seasons is virtually inevitable. The resulting union of deep winter and holy preparation makes reflection, even penitence, a natural activity.

"Lenzin" our German ancestors used to call this season, and since then we have called it Lent. It is a time when Christians decorate stone churches with the color of the sea and wrap their priests in mollusk's purple. It was once a time when all sorts of things passed through the natural depression of seclusion, short food supplies, and inactivity, a time when body and land rested. It is still, in the countryside, a final sanity before the absurd wastefulness of spring.

Each year, at Lenten time, I am challenged to desire butterflies and lilies, even to wish for resurrection. Each year I come a little closer to needing the dullness of the sky and the rarity of a single redhead woodpecker knocking for grubs in the pine bark. Each year, at Lenten time, I come a little closer to the single-mindedness of the drake who, muddy underside showing, waddles now across the ice to the cold water to wash himself for his mate, all in the hope of ducklings later on. It is a good image for my own Lenten journey, the struggle, the work, the pain, and the glorious joy of new birth at Easter.

I can remember, in that green time of Ordinary Time, to dread the stillness of the coming cold, to fear the weariness of winter menus, the bitterness of breaking open pond water for thirsty cattle, and the packing of lunches-interminable lunches-for reluctant children on their way to school.

But now, years later, it is Lent once again, and for one more snow I can luxuriate in the isolation of the cold, attend laconically to who I am, what I value, and why I am here. Religion has always kept earth time. Liturgy only gives sanction to what the heart already knows. Now, it is Lent once again.

Friday

HELPING ONE ANOTHER FIND TRUE PEACE

A reflection from The Life of Moses by St. Gregory of Nyssa

Once all of a person's inner impulses are led by reason, as a shepherd leads a flock of sheep, that person finds peace within and with others. The truth doesn't shine upon us unless we know how to live in such peace by helping each other find the nourishment we need so as to grow in God.

God is Truth. It should not surprise us that God revealed himself to the prophet, Moses, from a burning thorn bush. If truth is God then it is also light. It follows from this that a life of the sort of virtue that is genuinely Godly will give us a knowledge of the light which has descended to us from God. We don't look to the stars to find the light we need and it really isn't found in a burning bush but it comes to us in the form of a human being born of a virgin. Just as the thorn bush wasn't burnt up so the virgin's integrity wasn't destroyed or lessened because she became a mother.

The light which is Jesus Christ teaches us what we need to do if we are to stand always in the presence of the Divine Light. What we have to do is let God purify our minds from the assumptions about what is and is not of great value. We must learn that what is of God is valuable rather than what is merely of this present world. We assume many things about how our bodies may bring us happiness and contentment but they are mostly untrue. Jesus shows us how we can use our bodily abilities and members in the service of God's light and of helping one another live by that light.

What God wants is to bring all to salvation. Salvation is the life which we are to have with God forever as long as we answer his call to imitate our Lord Jesus. Moses saw rays of light shining from thorns. That is a symbol of how we learn to see what is good when we let works of love issue from our earthly self and all its members and abilities. We are to emit rays of love and mutual helpfulness, so to speak.

When we look to Jesus, as Israel once looked to Moses, we see God on his Holy Mountain. Then we become capable of caring most about serving and helping one another; we cease to concern ourselves about things like earthly position and precedence and honors. The love that Jesus shows us can destroy all the power of evil that may dwell within us. It can set those who are enslaved in various ways free. We find the freedom to do as Jesus did. We find that what we love and most rejoice in are the works of love such as he shows us. If Israel followed Moses through the desert and all its dangers, much more should we faithfully follow Christ. He leads us to a genuine land of promise. It is an ever-lasting land of promise. Peace consists in living in right relationship. Jesus shows us the way to relate rightly to God and to one another.

Saturday

OUR LENTEN OBSERVANCE

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

Blessed be God, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolations; it is he who consoles us in all our tribulations. Many are the tribulations of the just but the Lord delivers them from every one. We suffer, in fact, two kinds of tribulation. The reason is that we have a two-fold nature; we are fleshly and we are spiritual. As a result, we live on both these levels. We are, as long as we are in this world, partly carnal and partly spiritual in our behavior. According to our progress, or lack of it, we become more spiritual and less carnal or more carnal and less spiritual. Hence our two-fold tribulation. What is carnal in us is grieved by hardships while what is spiritual is grieved only by evil doing. If there were nothing carnal in us then no adversity would bother us, indeed there wouldn't be any adversity. The sadness we experience from hardships comes from what is carnal in us. The sadness we experience because we find iniquity in us is spiritual.

We seek both carnal and spiritual consolations. But when earthly consolation abounds, we should be more humble and cautious. When we have bodily health or when the weather is fine, we must use these things to help one another do what is spiritually good. No matter whether we are blessed by God with external or internal consolations we must seek to live in the joy of hope. If we share in Christ's sufferings we shall, after all, share in Christ's Kingdom.

As for the tribulations we suffer interiorly because of iniquity unless the Lord help us our foot would slip and we would fall. We are like Peter called to come to the Lord over stormy waters, weighed down by our earthly self but help up by our spiritual contact with Christ. The Lord gives us the support of his hand, even when we fall. We confess our sins and we gladly accept the tribulations that cleanse us inwardly. You need not fear the one who will come as judge if you have humbly confessed your weakness to Him and accepted the hardships of our life as suitable remedies for our seeking what is not God.

What we want is to burn with the fire of love, and to burn now rather than later. This is a fire that purifies. Behold, now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation. Let us listen to the words of St. Paul: While we have time let us do good to all. Woe to those who burn but not with the cleansing fire of love.

We are daily burned by our strictness of life, as by a purifying fire, and woe to us if we are not cleansed thereby of our iniquities. However, why should I fear? We have many consolations and we know we are being purified and made more fully spiritual. We shall be truly happy if we recognize our wretchedness and grieve over it in longing for the Lord, and for an all-consuming love of Him. We need not fear if we always live in reverence for the Lord and if we walk in caution and love.