

THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

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Sunday

HOW JESUS ENCOUNTERS & TRANSFORMS US

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

This Sunday we hear the story of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman. Jesus takes the initiative. He does so at the beginning by asking for a drink of water. She has come for water, as part of her human effort to make life meaningful and pleasant. But Jesus' mercy cuts across this human search and its vagueness. His words shape their encounter and ask her to reshape the desires that brought her to the well by expanding her awareness of what she, and all of us, seek.

The woman is looking for water and Jesus invites her to think beyond the sort of water she initially wanted. As she listens, she senses that he bears the mysterious gift of prophecy—after all, he knows her past life. She tries to make sense of the meeting by relating him to well-known biblical personalities, here that of Jacob who had the well dug. Jesus invites her to leave aside these ways of understanding what's happening. He suggests what she really wants is salvation and so the truth hinted at in the Bible's mysterious messianic prophecies.

Again, the woman tries to interpret what Jesus says in conventional ways; e.g., the controversies about whether Samaritans properly worship God. Won't the Messiah settle these matters? But Jesus wants her to think of herself and her quest for life rather than distract herself with such matters. He tries to broaden her perspective and make it personal. What's happening to her is a "saving opportunity", a *kairos* in the New Testament's Greek.

Jesus always starts from our concrete situation and opens it so one glimpses a radical newness beckoning to us. It points us toward God's saving design. Jesus is The Truth; in him and in the Gospel, we encounter the full and total truth of ourselves in relation to our God. There is in us all a longing for this truth and it is there even in the most ordinary situations, when they bring us to Jesus.

Think of what the Holy Spirit gives to one who believes in Jesus. The Spirit gives the ability to interpret the circumstances of life as opportunities to reflect on one's own and one's life's meaning, and to open oneself to the richer, deeper meaning offered us in Jesus and the Gospel. The Spirit gives us the ability to grasp the power of Jesus and the Gospel to unify us inwardly with Jesus as the center of our living. The Spirit gives us the ability to assimilate the power of the languages Jesus uses to speak with us—not only ordinary language but that of the Bible and the liturgy and theology—and without letting it sound banal; all are turned into talk about our relationships, starting with that to Jesus. And Jesus draws her toward the community created by faith in Him and his message and tells her it is the saving community she has sought in five marriages but not found. She is inspired to begin to share what she has experienced with Jesus by leading her friends and neighbors to encounter him as she did. "He knew all about me, and showed me how to live. Don't you want this too?!"

Monday

LEADING ONE ANOTHER TO THE TRUTH

A reflection from Degrees of Humility & Pride by St. Bernard

Knowledge of the truth is knowledge of Christ, and it is given us in three degrees. In the first instance, we are led to seek truth in ourselves and about ourselves. In the second, we are led to seek the truth that is in our neighbor, and in the third we are given truth in its own essential nature.

One begins to discover truth in oneself when one passes judgment on oneself. One is given truth through the neighbor when we suffer in sympathy with another. We are led to truth itself when we contemplate in purity of heart.

Notice the order in which truth is given us. Before we can inquire into truth itself The Truth has to teach us to seek it with our neighbor and before we do this, we must be opened to finding it in ourselves. The sequence of the Beatitudes listed in the Sermon on the Mount put the blessing of being merciful before that of being pure in heart. The merciful are those who are quick to see truth in their neighbor when they reach out to others in compassion and identify with them in love. They respond to another's joys and sorrows as if they were their own. They make themselves weak with the weak and they burn with indignation when others are led astray and harmed. They are always ready to share not only the joys of those who are rejoicing but the sorrows of those who are mourning.

The exercise of charity toward one's neighbor cleanses a person's inner vision. Those who are thus cleansed can delight in the contemplation of truth as such. It is, after all, love of truth that causes us to take upon ourselves the misfortunes of others. But can anyone find truth like this in relation to the neighbor if they refuse to support them in these ways? Suppose they scoff at tears or disparage joys. This seems to be insensitive to all feelings but one's own. A popular saying illustrates it: "A healthy person can't feel the pains of sickness, nor can the well-fed feel those of hunger." The more familiar we are with sickness or hunger the greater our compassion for the sick or hungry is likely to be.

Just as pure truth can be grasped only by the pure in heart, so the sufferings of our fellow men and women are truly felt best by those who know suffering themselves. We can't sympathize with the wretchedness of others—spiritual as well as physical—if we don't first recognize our own. So, we start by receiving truth about ourselves. Then we are prepared to understand the feelings of others by what we have personally felt. Then we know how to come to their help through the help we have received. Our Savior suffered himself so that we might know his compassion and he accepted affliction so we might know his mercy. Scripture says he learned what obedience costs through suffering. In all this our Savior has shown us the path that leads to genuine contemplation. We have only to follow him.

Tuesday

LIFE INCLUDES CONFLICTS

from How to do theology by **Walter Cardinal Kasper**

As language is a living reality, so also is tradition a living tradition. We have that tradition that we receive only through the act of transmission, in other words in tradition in its active sense. Tradition is not a package and a burden that we have to drag along. It is much more a fresh spring that is never exhausted.

In the final analysis, tradition always needs to be young and to stay young. The Church, and in a special way, theology are instrumental in translating the original sense of the Gospel into the present day. This endeavor is the very meaning of “aggiornamento”, of bringing the original message, transmitted by tradition, up to date and relevant for today.

This task of updating of mediation, will often lead to conflict with current opinions. Christian faith is never obvious. It is impossible to avoid the scandal of the cross, and become everyone’s darling. There can often exist, within the Church, different interpretations of the one and the same Gospel. All life is constituted by tensions: where tensions end, life comes to an end. We don’t want a boring, dead Church but a living Church. Tensions when they don’t become deadly contradictions, can be enriching complementary aspects. I see this as the contexts for my own debates with then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. We are Catholics and remain friends. Theologians should not become stumbling blocks of division but agents of diversity within unity. As Christians, as theologians, we are called to build up the communion and speak the truth in love. Life includes conflict. There is no need to be afraid of it.

Wednesday

THE JOY OF PRAYING THE PSALMS

Excerpts from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

The Scriptures address us in the words of the bridegroom of the Song of Songs, saying: "You who dwell in the gardens, let me hear your voice". He may be inviting those who love him to sing psalms and pray. So, let us begin by considering the discipline of heart and body we ought to employ when we sing psalms or pray in the sight of the angels. We don't want to send away the angels who came to carry our prayers up to God and bring back down to us God's gifts. Our bridegroom himself stands at the door and knocks; if no devotion answers him from within us or opens the door of our heart for him, he may go away complaining and saying, "I have given heed and listened but no one speaks what is good; there is no one who repents of his sins but they are all set on their own courses like horses with no rider to guide them."

O Jesus, true gardener, effect in us what you ask of us. For without you we can do nothing. You are the true gardener, the Creator who cultivates and protects your garden. You plan it by your word, water it with your Spirit, give growth by your power. Mary Magdalen wasn't mistaken when she thought Jesus who came to her at the empty tomb was a gardener. He is the gardener of the whole world; he is the gardener of Heaven; he is the gardener of the Church, which he plants and waters here until its growth is completed and he transplants it into the land of the living near the streams of eternally living water. There it will not be afraid when heat comes, and its foliage will always be green, and it will never cease to bear the fruit of love and praise. Blessed too are we who dwell in these gardens; forever we will praise the Lord.

We dwell in such a garden when we meditate on the Law of the Lord day and night, and walk about in as many gardens as we read books, and pick the apples of fine thoughts we are given there. Blessed are those for whom all these apples, old and new, are kept safe. They are the words of prophets and of evangelists and of apostles, and through them we taste the sweetness of our bridegroom. We search the Scriptures even as we sing psalms, drawing wondrous thoughts of love for our God and his Christ as we do it. We walk about in the garden of Scripture and must not be heedless and let our minds wander but rather be busy bees gathering honey from every flower, reaping the Spirit from the words we sing. After all, Jesus says: My words are sweeter than honey.

The garden within us shall flourish in the springtime, the day of Resurrection, when Jesus will call us forth. The just shall then bloom like lilies and blossom forever. We indeed are already people who dwell in the Lord's gardens and delight in their wonders. From these gardens the Bridegroom will lead us into others where rest is more hidden and enjoyment more blessed and beauty more wonderful. Absorbed in God's praises with accents of exultation and thanks-giving we will dwell within God's very House. Even now he calls us to "come and see", taste the joy of the unapproachable light.

Thursday

THE SELF- OFFERING THAT IS LENT

A reflection taken from a homily by St. Peter Chrysologus

Perseverance in faith, devotion and virtue is assured by three things: prayer, fasting and mercy. Prayer knocks at the door, fasting gains entrance, and mercy receives God's gifts. These three things are all one and they give life to each other.

Fasting is the soul of prayer, and mercy is the lifeblood of fasting. Let no one try to separate them; this is impossible. If we have only one of them, if we don't have all three together, we have nothing. Whoever prays must also fast and whoever fasts must also show mercy. If we want our petitions heard we must hear those of others. God's ear will be open to us if we do not turn a deaf ear to others.

When we fast, we should recall what it means to be really hungry. That enables us to feel for the hunger of others. If we hope for mercy, we must show mercy and if we look for kindness, we must show it. If we want to receive, we must give. Only a shameless person would ask for self what has been refused to others. The rule should be: Show mercy in the same way and with the same generosity you would wish it to be shown to you.

Let prayer, mercy and fasting, then, be one single appeal to God. What we have lost by despising others let us regain by fasting. By fasting let us offer our souls in sacrifice, for we can make no better offering to God. Isaiah proves this by his words: A sacrifice pleasing to God is a contrite spirit; a contrite and humbled heart, O God, you will not spurn. Offer yourself to God; make him an oblation of your fasting, so that you may be a pure offering, a holy sacrifice, a living victim, remaining your own and at the same time made over to God.

Whoever fails to give this gift to God will not be excused. You are never without the means to give yourself; the gift we all need to give is ourselves. To make our offerings acceptable mercy must be added to them. Fasting bears no fruit unless it is watered by mercy. When mercy dries up fasting does too; mercy is to fasting as rain is to the earth. However much you may cultivate your heart, also clear the soil of your character by rooting out your vices and sowing virtues. When you fast, a thin sowing of mercy means a thin harvest. What you pour out yourself in mercy the result overflows into your inner barn. So don't lose by trying wrongly to save, but gather in by scattering. To give to others is to give to yourself. We are not allowed to keep what we have refused to give and share with others.

Lent is a time for conversion and first of all for conversion of heart. It is a time when we let go of merely created ways of sustaining ourselves. We don't look to self and caring for self but place that in God's hands. That is the gift of self when it is really made. But God gives to all and God would have us imitate him in this. Give and it shall be given to you. You now know the truth. Go and live it even as Our Lord did.

Friday

HOW PRAYER GETS WINGS

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

If I am not mistaken you have often experienced the fact that fasting gives devotion and confidence to prayer. Think how intimately they are joined. As it is written, “brother helps brother so that both are comforted”. Fasting demands the virtue of prayer, and prayer gains the grace of fasting but prayer sanctifies fasting and offers it to the Lord. What profit do we get from fasting if it remains on earth? We must lift up fasting, then, on the wing of prayer.

But one wing may not be enough. The prayer of the just, says Scripture, pierces the heavens. Our fasting needs two wings, prayer and justice. What is justice but giving to each what is proper? Do not pay attention to God alone. You are also indebted to others, to those over you and those who serve with you. Perhaps you have been thinking: What do the opinions of human beings matter to me? But God is in no way pleased by anything that gives scandal to others.

Think of the phrase: “Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly!” That requires that we maintain unity, cherish peace and love one another. The proud Pharisee kept a fast and gave thanks to God but he separated himself from others. I am not like others, he said. His fasting had only one wing and so didn’t rise to Heaven. Take care that your fast has two wings.

Seek holiness and peace, without which we know that no one can please God. Join your fasting to pure intention and devout prayer that you may make an acceptable offering to the divine majesty. Mortify the flesh while maintaining unity of heart with all of the community of faith. The more efficacious prayer is the more gravely hindered it is by cowardice of spirit and excessive fear. This happens when one thinks of one’s own unworthiness as not to keep the eyes fixed on God’s kindness. God’s deep mercy calls to the depths of human misery. If iniquity is great, God’s loving kindness is infinitely greater. When your soul is troubled remember God’s mercy and be refreshed by it.

But as there is a danger that prayer will be too timid, there is likewise a danger that it be rash. I wouldn’t take away from sinners their confidence in prayer but have them pray as people who commit sin. We should pray with a contrite heart and a humble spirit, like the Publican rather than the Pharisee.

But don’t let your prayer be lukewarm. Let it flow from deep feeling. If it is lukewarm prayer grows weak in its upward flight, it falls back; it meets resistance, and far from winning grace, this deserves punishment. Prayer that is faithful, humble, and fervent will undoubtedly pierce Heaven. It will certainly not return fruitless. Be not afraid. Act boldly in your devotion and God will bring you to His Heavenly Home.

Saturday

A CALL TO UNITY

from Preface to the Complete Works of Fr Thomas Merton OCSO

I am one of millions whose destiny brought him from the shores of Europe to become a citizen of the Western Hemisphere, a man of the New world. I came seeking an answer to the inscrutable problems of life and found an answer to both old and new. I found a world of salvation in the New World. I also found the paradoxical vocation of the contemplative life.

The contemplative life applies where there is life. Wherever people and society exist; where there are hopes, ideals, aspirations for a better future; where there is love- and where there is mingled pain and happiness- there contemplative life has a place, because life, happiness, pain, ideals, aspirations, work, art, and other things have significance. Thus, the independent significance of each thing must converge in some way into a central and universal significance which comes from a hidden reality. This is what we may call a "divine reality". The reality central to my life is the life in God. To know this is the contemplative's objective.

For me the word of salvation, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, has led me to solitude and silence. My vocation is rare, perhaps, but contemplation does not only exist within the walls of the cloister. Every person, to live a full and significant life, is called simply to know the significance of interior life, and to find in its proper inscrutable existence, the Living God. Every person born on this earth is called to realize themselves in Christ and, through him, to comprehend the unity of Christ with all men and women.

I cannot be a partial American and I cannot be, which is even sadder a partial Catholic. For me Catholicism is not confined to one culture, one nation, one age, one race. My Catholicism is not a mixture of the Irish Catholicism of the United States and the splendid and vital Catholicism of my native France. Though I admire the cathedrals and the past of Catholicism in Latin America, my Catholicism goes beyond the Spanish tradition. My Catholicism is all the world and all ages. It dates from the beginning of the world.

To be truly Catholic is not merely to be correct according to an abstractly universal standard of truth, but also and above all, to enter into the problems and the joys of all, to understand all, to be all things to all men and women. I cannot be a Catholic unless it is made quite clear to the world that I too, am a Jew and a Moslem, a Buddhist too. I must undermine all that comfortable and social Catholicism stands for: this lining up of cassocks, this regimenting of birettas. I throw my biretta into the river.

If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, in the end I will find there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic and certainly no breath of the Holy Spirit with which to affirm it.