

THE FOURTH WEEK IN LENT

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by Carlo Cardinal Martini
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from a lecture at Fordham University in 1991
by Avery Cardinal Dulles

Sunday

ACCEPTING THE LORD'S HEALING PERSONALLY

A reflection developed from a Letter by St. Ambrose

The Lord Jesus, when he was merely walking along, caught sight of a person who had been blind from birth. If the Lord didn't ignore him neither will he ignore us, and we shouldn't overlook that fact. The Lord considers us worthy of his attention. Now we should notice the fact that this person had been blind from birth. It is important—not only for the person the Gospel story talks about but for each of us. Until Christ gave us light, we too were blind, born blind.

There are various kinds of blindness. For instance, it may result from serious illness or age obscuring one's vision and this can often be cured. Take that caused by cataracts; it can be cured when a surgeon removes its cause. But those Jesus encounters aren't curable by surgical skill but only by the power of God. When nature is defective the Creator, who is the author of nature, has the power to restore it. That is what has happened to us. We were naturally lacking what we needed to see spiritually. Jesus said: "*As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world*". So, all who are blind are able to gain sight through Jesus.

But this is only the case if one knows to whom to go to receive sight. Jesus is saying to us: Come! Receive the light so that you may become able to see! What is Jesus telling us? Think! Jesus brought human beings back to life; Jesus restored people to health—and by a simple word of command; Jesus said to a corpse, "*Come out!*", and Lazarus came out of the tomb; Jesus said to a paralytic, "*Arise and pick up your mat*", and the man rose and picked up the mat he had been lying on—as helpless and a cripple. What, then, is Jesus conveying to us by the story of how he spit on the ground, mixed his spittle with the clay, and put it on a blind person's eye, saying "*Go and wash yourself in the pool of Siloam*"? We are told that 'Siloam' means "sent"; be washed by the one who has been sent, Jesus.

Surely the Lord's actions and words have great significance for us or they would not have been made part of the proclamation of the salvation that comes in Jesus the Christ. The person healed received more than just physical sight. Jesus' touch not only healed but enlightened. He teaches us that God, who made us out of clay, can heal and enlighten us. We too are to come to the one whom God "sent" to give us this gift. In Christ we will be able to see. We will see that everything that happens to us is an opportunity to draw closer to God by love and obedience. We were blind and have received the ability to see—if we will use it continually. We do this when we see our every action and reaction as something we do in and with our God. We do this when we confess this to those we live with and with whom we share our lives and caring deeds. In doing it we are redeemed. We walk in faith with our God and that opens our eyes to his loving presence healing us more and more deeply and completely. "*The night is almost over and the day is at hand!*" Begin to walk in the light of that new kind of day.

Monday

OUR FAITH JOURNEY

A reflection developed from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

In telling the story of Jesus' healing of one born blind St. John the Evangelist underlines the ability that faith in Jesus brings to refuse to give up but to seek to follow God's way through an encounter with Jesus. He person meets Jesus in the Temple; he came to pray and give thanks. Jesus had healed, without any conditions, a person who didn't even know who he was. St. John turns this into a model for the faith journey through which everyone comes to God through Jesus.

There are many people present but St. John first focuses attention on the small group of Pharisees. They witness the miracle but they don't "see" what it means. The problem is that they always stay the same and don't change. They, you see, already "know" everything about God and how God acts and so don't take Jesus' mysterious signs seriously. They can't "see" that God acts in ways outside their understanding. So, they judge that Jesus is a sinner because he doesn't observe the Sabbath in the way they "know" it must be observed. His actions don't match their ideas of God and of the Messiah, the Anointed One.

This is a kind of warning. We can't make a journey of faith to God with Jesus if we think we already see and know everything God wants. If one does one ends up not seeing the glory of God in Jesus and Jesus' works. Our journey requires that we be open to change—inwardly even more than outwardly. One who is blind, on the other hand, is ready to be renewed and taught new things. Physical transformation is overshadowed by faith transformation. Bodily needs somehow become opportunities to be made aware of deeper poverties. Do we seek not only physical things but a person who will fill our life and make us whole in a new way? Are we ready to leave behind old concepts, so as to open ourselves to the person who shows us spiritual newness? Like that ancient blind man, are you ready to be mocked and laughed at and pushed aside so that you can share in the newness of life which God has kindled in your heart?

St. John's Gospel outlines a process of growth. First one who had been blind and was then cured by one he didn't know, recognizes that Jesus is the one who helped him. Then he sees Jesus as a prophet, one who speaks for God. Finally, he accepts Jesus as Messiah and Savior. But, in the background, there is always a crowd, and we are part of that crowd. We listen to the words of Jesus and we too plead for help. And Jesus looks at us and is concerned for us. We have been there listening and hoping throughout Jesus' ministry. We need to recognize Jesus concern for us in what St. John says about the "crowds". Jesus nourishes us. Jesus heals us inwardly. Jesus teaches and forms us. Jesus knows we can accept a call to follow him, and in a way that perfectly suits the gifts we have been given and the life we led before we encountered him. So, let's seriously accept his call and follow him.

Tuesday

JOURNEYING TO THE TRUTH

A reflection excerpted from a sermon by St. Bernard

Watch and pray that you do not enter into temptation. These were the Lord's words when he was approaching his passion. Notice how often at this time he prayed not for himself but for his disciples. If there was such peril for disciples because of their Lord's passion how much greater is the peril we run because of our own passion. We read that life on earth is full of temptations, and, if that is the case, we must constantly be on watch lest we fall. In the Lord's prayer we beg, "lead us not into temptation".

Yet, however surrounded we may be by temptations, the Truth surrounds us as with a shield. Evidently this must be a spiritual shield, since it can surround us on all sides. The Lord doesn't primarily protect our physical selves or things but what is spiritual in us and in our lives. He teaches us to seek first the Kingdom of God, and then everything else will be given us. Of course, without the physical things we can't live or seek God, and the Heavenly Father doesn't want us to be so preoccupied with such things that we slight our spiritual growth and the exercises that involves. He really is with us at all times watching over us.

This is part of that Truth to which our God would lead us. This truth will surround you like a shield. That is why you need not fear the terror of the night or the arrow that flies by day or the bogey that prowls in the darkness nor assault by the noonday devil. These words point out the four temptations by which we are surrounded and thus shows why we need the shield of Truth.

Rather than feeling secure, however, we ought to be wary of temptation; we ought to beg to be delivered from it. I can't promise you perfect freedom, or quiet rest, not so long as you are in this mortal body of ours. But we may consider how God's kindness shows us care in allowing us to suffer some light temptations while warding off the more dangerous ones. God delivers us from those, to face the ones God knows will be more useful to us in our spiritual growth.

Think then of the trials you face by night, awake or asleep. Then you discover how little you have turned away from old habits and lusts. In the same way, when the burden of daily labor weighs heavily on us and exhausts us we must fear grumbling and discontent. Indeed, both by night and day the primary danger is our own feeling of fear. It increases the power of temptation the more we flee it without turning to prayer and holy thoughts. No matter the number of our temptations there is one cure for them all—we must turn to the Lord. Then he becomes our shield in truth.

The more filled we are with this truth the less fear can master us or control us by making us flee from our own feelings and thoughts and sense of weakness. Do not be afraid. The Lord cares for you and loves you and gives you what is needed to resist and overcome every temptation. In this truth we can find rest and peace.

Wednesday

BREASTPLATE OF ST. PATRICK

I arise today, Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity, Through a belief in the threeness, through confession of the oneness, of the creator of creation.

I arise today, through the strength of Christ's birth with his baptism, through the strength of his crucifixion with his burial, through the strength of his resurrection and ascension, through the strength of his descent for the judgement of doom.

I arise today through the strength of the love of the Cherubim, in obedience of angels, in the service of archangels, in the hope of resurrection to meet with rewards, in prayer of patriarchs, in prediction of prophets, in preaching of apostles, in faith of confessors, in innocence of holy virgins, in deeds of righteous men and women.

I arise today through the strength of heaven, light of the sun, radiance of moon, splendor of fire, speed of lightening, swiftness of wind, dept of the sea, stability of earth, firmness of rock.

I arise today through God's strength to pilot me, God's wisdom to guide me, God's eye to look before me, God's ear to hear me, God's word to speak for me, God's hand to guard me, God's way to to lie before me, God's shield to protect me, God's host to save me.

From everyone who shall wish me ill, from snares of devils, from temptation of vices, God's shield to protect me, God's host to save me, from snares of devils, from everyone who shall wish me ill, afar and anear, alone and in a multitude.

Christ to shield me today against poison, against burning, against drowning, against wounding, so that there may come to me abundance of reward.

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in the eye who sees me, Christ in the ear of everyone who hears me.

I arise today through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity, through belief in the threeness, through confession of the oneness, of the Creator of Creation. Amen.

Thursday

THE FOLLOWING OF CHRIST IN SPIRIT

Extracted from The Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis

“*One who follows me*”, says Christ our Savior, “*doesn’t walk in darkness but has the light of life*”. These are words of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are being admonished to follow his teachings and his manner of living. If we would truly be enlightened and delivered from all blindness of heart we must do this.

Let us all the fervor of our heart be from now on directed to meditating on the life of Christ. His holy teachings are of more strength and helpfulness than the words of all the angels and saints together. Whoever, through grace, has the inner openness of soul for true contemplation of the Gospel of Christ will find in these words a hidden manna.

It often seems that people who hear the Gospel and do no more find little sweetness in what they hear. The reason is that they don’t listen with the spirit of Christ. Do you desire to have a right understanding of Scripture, especially of the Gospels? They you must dedicate yourself to conforming your life as much as you can to Christ’s life.

What good will it be for anyone to reason about lofty and hidden mysteries, like that of the Trinity, if that person lacks humility? Such a one is displeasing the Holy Trinity rather than being drawn near. In very truth, such a path is useless. You can’t make yourself holy by deeply questioning and reasoning. It is a good life that makes one righteous and holy and beloved of God. I would rather feel compunction of heart for my sins than merely know the correct definition of compunction.

If you know all the books of the Bible by memory, and if you know all the sayings of the philosophers by heart, what good can this do you unless you receive grace and charity? Except for loving God and serving God there is nothing but emptiness in the world. Realizing this is the noblest and most excellent wisdom any creature can have. By putting the world down to its true value, one draws nearer and nearer to the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is a very empty thing to labor inordinately for worldly wealth, which will perish in no long time. It is similarly empty to covet honor or any out of order pleasure or merely fleshly delights. Do this in the present life and you will be bitterly punished. It is a supreme vanity to desire a long life while caring little about living a good life. You are paying attention to present things rather than what is coming. You are loving what will shortly be gone.

Dedicate yourself to withdrawing your love from what is merely visible and turning it to the invisible realities. Those who follow only what they sense hurt themselves and lose the grace of God. The eye is not satisfied or pleased just by seeing, nor is the ear satisfied by mere hearing. That is proverbial wisdom and to be kept always in your mind. True satisfaction is found only in love for God.

Friday

WHAT IS FAITH LIKE WHEN IT IS MATURE?

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

Even before Jesus was born, Joseph was a believer and mature in faith. The events surrounding the conception and birth of Jesus reveal how differently he behaved and struggled when he had to move toward a greater knowledge of God and a deeper faith in and God's will, for him and for us. The Gospel uses two key words to help us understand: "Her husband Joseph, being a man of honor and wanting to spare her publicly, decided to divorce her informally".

The exegetes have devoted much time to the meaning of this statement, since the text and its translations are not so clear as they might be. For our purposes, it is enough to say that even persons of honor, or in New Testament language, believers who are mature in faith and act out of charity) find themselves caught in anxious and difficult situations.

It seems, first, that Joseph's integrity led him to want to withhold his own name from a baby whose father he did not know. This was a matter of legal honor; Joseph can't give his name to a child that isn't his own. But, second, Joseph's integrity also insists on Mary's virtue, and so he refused to expose to the rigor of the Law a mystery he did not understand; this is goodness. Naturally, this conflict of conscience caused him pain and distress. Joseph was well aware of the Law but at that moment his mature faith and charity overcome it. He chooses the person, Mary, rather than the Law.

Can you think of how often Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their way of interpreting the Law? It was a form of hardness of heart. He doesn't criticize their attachment to the Law but their approach to justice; it lacked charity. Joseph, however, had struggled to reach a balance. He wasn't exempt from anxiety but took upon himself the decision to do the honorable thing, as he saw the matter. It was the fruit of charity. It was the fruit of his maturity in faith.

Joseph was open to the power of Divine grace and its illumination. An angel of the Lord came to resolve the situation in the end. Joseph had been afraid he wouldn't be faithful to God and the angel tells him not to fear. Then he reveals the deeper meaning of the event that so puzzled Joseph. He was probably filled with pure joy.

The figure of Joseph allows us to grasp a fundamental teaching. We need to have a hope that is patient, that can wait—as Joseph did. We need a hope that knows how to suffer through difficult situations with a humble spirit. We need a hope that is sure God will answer our genuine need. That is trusting faith. That is mature faith.

Saturday

JOHN PAUL 2 AND THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

from a lecture at Fordham University in 1991 by Avery Cardinal Dulles

The majority of Catholics are not strongly inclined toward evangelization. The very term for them has a Protestant ring. Absorbed in the inner problems of the Church, and occasionally in issues of justice and peace, contemporary Catholics feel relatively little responsibility for spreading the faith. Even at times when Catholics were seeking converts, the thrust was not evangelical; the Gospel was hardly at the center.

Pope John Paul 2 has challenged these assumptions, building on the legacy of his predecessors, especially Paul 6. He places a particular emphasis on the evangelization of culture. Faith cannot take root, express itself, and grow unless it incarnates itself in cultural forms. In every culture there are seeds of the Word that tend to bear fruit in harmony with the gospel. Whoever seeks to evangelize must understand the mentality and attitude of the modern world, to illuminate them from the perspective of the Gospel, and purify and elevate the sound elements in the light of Christian revelation. The missionaries of the past, the Pope reminds us, did much to raise the level of the arts, including music, dance and the theater. They rightly saw this as falling within their evangelizing mission. This is a very broad understanding of evangelization. The monk in the monastery is as much an evangelizer as the person working with poor in the barrios, as the composer working on a classical religious song.

John Paul is quite aware of the problems inherent in the modern means of communication and of the incapacity of mass media to take the place of direct contact between persons. But notwithstanding their limitations, the new media must be responsibly used in the service of truth, solidarity and peace, and thereby contributes to evangelization. The media has a wonderful power, John Paul teaches, to bring people together. All Christians should use the media to make the Gospel and its values more present in the world. Each Christian and each Christian community must find the appropriate way for them to do that.

All of this constitutes a remarkable shift in the Catholic tradition. For centuries evangelization has been a poor stepchild. Even when the term was used, evangelization was treated as a secondary matter, the special vocation of a few priests and religious. Today we seem to be witnessing the birth of a new Catholicism, which without loss of its institutional, sacramental, and social dimensions, is authentically evangelical. No Christian, no community is exempt from this responsibility. The Church is of crucial importance but it cannot be self-centered. The first and foremost priority for the Church is to proclaim the Good News concerning Jesus Christ as a joyful message to all the world. Pope John Paul 2 encourages each of us to find our way to do it.