

THE ELEVENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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Sunday

IMAGINING THE UNIMAGINABLE

A reflection from a sermon by St. Peter Chrysologus

This Sunday we are told that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed. What can that possible mean? Are we hoping for something tiny? Can some-thing like that motivate a virgin's long years of self-restraint, can it be the prize for the blood of a martyr? Can this be that mystery which no eye has seen or ear heard and which no human heart has imagined? Here we see a challenge to our faith—we don't know how to think of that which is promised to those who love God with all their heart.

Let's face this challenge by recalling the Scripture passage which tells us that God's weakness is stronger than human strength, and that God's foolishness is wiser than all human wisdom. If we believe this, it shouldn't surprise us that the smallest of all seeds is somehow greater than the entire earth. This means that the Kingdom of God is sown in us, in our minds and hearts, as something needing to grow, and grow in a way that will lift us up with it as high as God's Kingdom. It will enlarge our faculties of mind and heart and will produce a great knowledge and a vast love that will make us burn with longing love and grasp the breadth of God's truth.

We start by remembering that Christ himself is the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ has been sown within us like a mustard seed. He was first sown in the Virgin's womb but he grew up into the Tree of the Cross with branches that now spread over the entire world. When a mustard seed is crushed then its pungency is experienced and it not only flavors and seasons everything with which it is mixed but preserves it. So, it was with Christ. So, it is to be with us in whom the crushed Christ has been sown. This mustard seed must be crushed in us if we are to experience the power of God's Kingdom, and if we are to spread it throughout the worlds that are our lives.

Christ became all things in order to restore all of us to God's image and to the full sharing in God's life of loving. The man Jesus received the kingdom of God as a mustard seed and sowed it in the garden that is the Church, his Body. It extends over the entire world—tilled by the plow that is the Gospel, protected by the stakes that are sound doctrine and discipline, cleared of every noxious weed by the labors of those sent as evangelists, and lovely with the perennial flowers that are holy lives. This is the paradise of God and we are its gardeners.

A mustard seed is a symbol of hope. God promised a kingdom to the patriarchs. This hope took root and sprang up through the ministry of the prophets. Through the apostles and all who preach the Gospel by word or example it grew great like a plant large enough to house a whole flock of birds; the Church became a tree filling the entire earth. We too must "take the wings of a dove" to fly to this tree and find rest in its branches. There we may dwell securely no matter what tribulations come. From this resting place we show forth foreshadowings of all that is to come into the world here and hereafter. Rest and labor become one reality and bring us both suffering and joy. What imagination can't encompass, a heart at rest in God can embrace in hope. That hope is yours. Rejoice in it.

Monday

THE EXAMPLE THAT IS A HOLY LIFE

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

A servant of the Lord is dead, a devoted brother and servant of all died in my arms. We saw how death devoured him and also saw that it could kill only the flesh. It took from us a dear friend and brother, a wise counselor and a strong helper who in spite of much labor spoke of himself as a “freeloader” in our community. Such was his humility and goodness.

But death has taken only the flesh and the soul has gone to its creator. He longed for this most ardently and walking all his days along the path that leads there. Death will one day have to give back even that flesh and it will cry out with joy and clap hands in gladness. The Only-Begotten of the Heavenly Father will come and see our brother and reconfigure him to the brilliance of his own heavenly glory.

This servant of God displayed for us a kind of lived sermon composed of every sort of holiness. It was as long and inclusive as was the length of his days. It was sublime. If you remember as well as I do that sermon it is engraved on your hearts. He lived so many years in service of the One who makes our service a way of reigning with Him. He lived with us almost from the foundation of our monastery and he lived not only blamelessly but with grace. His memory will be a blessing, not only for us but for generations to come.

He passed his life in this world as a pilgrim and a stranger, since he knew that he was not of this world. Here he had no abiding city and he looked steadily toward the future and the prize of a Christian’s upward calling. He accepted from the world its resources in so far as there was need and would have taken less except for the call of obedience. He was gentle and lowly of heart and has a special grasp of gracious mildness. He loved humility and so was affable to all and was intensely loveable.

Did anyone ever hear from him a petty remark or an unkind word, a boast or an envious comment? Did anyone hear him judge others or agree with those who did? Did he indulge in foolish talk? Truly, he guarded his way lest he should offend with his tongue. He always showed a bright countenance and sought not to be a burden to others but he never completely gave way to laughter either. You saw his fervor in the worship of God, right up to the day of his death.

What was he like in giving advice? He was clear and discreet. It was not only I who knew that but you all did. What of his charity? He found excuses for everyone; he intervened on everyone’s behalf, even when those concerned didn’t know it. He was lowly of heart and mild in speech, diligent in his work, burning in charity and faithful in all that was entrusted to him. He planted his feet in the way of Jesus Christ. He was a poor as Jesus was. He lived a life in labor as the Lord did. Practice these virtues and aim for the ideal his example gives us. You saw and heard him and know that as you come to Christ you will come to him as well. Let us all live thus in Christ now that we may be with him forever.

Tuesday

HUMILITY AND READING THE GOSPELS

From Encounter by Metropolitan Anthony Bloom

Very often people read the Gospels and mark in them the passages that strike them, as if reverencing their own sinfulness and unworthiness. I think that serves no useful purpose rather, it only drives people to despair. When one looks at oneself and thinks “I am not all that nice to know”, then it is already rather bad; but when one looks in the mirror of the Gospels, and it seems that God is saying to you” Look how spiritually ugly you are!”-then there is indeed nothing to support you. So’ my advice is: read the gospels, and mark everything to which you feel affinity. When we read a certain section, we can have different kinds of reaction. There are places which hardly affect us as of course Christ knows best, but they do not touch me. There are places – if we are absolutely honest-about which we would say: “Oh no, Lord! Oh no! This is not for me”.

If we can say to God: “How splendid that is!” – it means that we have met God in this saying, in this image, in this sermon, in this commandment. We can be overcome with joy, delight, and, like the travelers at Emmaus, exclaim: “Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked on the road?”. In our terms, this will mean that when we read a section and can say “Lord, how splendid this is! My God, how wonderful this is!” we have then understood something. And if one thinks of oneself as a very spoiled and damaged icon, it means: “Here is a remnant within me, an undamaged remnant of the image of God, and I must cherish it as a holy commandment, for in this I am already in harmony with God. If I break this, I not only break my relationship with God, but I also destroy whatever is godly and holy in me“. And this is the beginning of asceticism, because these little, let us say, stars in the sky must be defended from being destroyed in any way. They are like embers in the hearth that we can put out; and asceticism consists in defending these embers, as it were to feed them, so that the flame will grow, so that the embers will develop into one big flame, possibly a fire.

If you concentrate only on the bad things you can find in yourself (even without the Gospels it is enough to look in a mirror), then life will become a strange exercise, as if it all boils down to clearing the obstacles from a road you do not even mean to walk upon. It is enough to try to be oneself in the best Gospel meaning of the word, following the example of Christ. There is a particular spiritual endeavor for every person.

Wednesday

SAINT LUTGARDE

Fr Thomas Merton OCSO

Without any question, the most extraordinary and most important figure in Cistercian mysticism in the early thirteenth century was St Lutgarde. She was a famous stigmatist of her day.

Even before she entered the Cistercian convent of Ayieres, and while she was still a Benedictine nun at Touyres, her sanctity and mystical graces had given her a wide reputation, and we read of important secular and church figures travelling long distances to visit and consult her. So, in her we have an example of a very extraordinary and special vocation, the vocation of a soul called in a particular manner by Christ to a life of intimate union with him in his sufferings.

Her life and her story bring home more cogently and more vividly to the imagination the closeness of Jesus to humanity and his intense desire to pour out his special graces upon souls. We are reminded through her that we are all called to suffer in union with the suffering Christ in his body, the Church, to make reparation for sin and to win grace for sinners. She inspires us to follow her own example of self-sacrifice as best we can, even if it is only a matter of accepting the common routine of religious life in the spirit with which she accepted her own sufferings.

Another thing is that St Lutgarde and her contemporary mystics represent a new development in Christian piety. Nowhere before their time do we find so clear and uncompromising a statement of the ideals of abandonment and victimhood with Jesus.

With St Lutgarde we find the double insistence on the eminently passive character of those sufferings, and on the intensity of personal union with the sufferings of Christ. Thus, we see in the Church a desire to die with Christ, a death for and by love.

St Lutgarde's mysticism is an almost unbroken series of visions, revelations, and ecstasies, together with a clear teaching on discernment of spirits. She experienced difficulties even with her own sisters. They often smiled at her fervor and assured her that she was going through a stage that would soon be over and that then she would be like everybody else. St Lutgarde was tempted by fear and discouragement by what she heard, but she was reassured by a vision of Our Blessed Lady, who assured her that she was not called into a tepid and unspiritual way of life.

St Lutgarde's prayer was thus "Take my heart O lord, but do so as to unite your heart's love to my poor heart that I may possess my own heart only in you, ever safe in your protection. Amen."

Thursday

HOW GOD TEACHES US THE TRUTH **Inspired by a sermon of St. Augustine of Hippo**

Blessed Joseph Mary Cassant died at the age of 25 after a life filled with sickness, suffering and weakness. He was never able to do an ordinary day's work and may never have passed a day without experiencing painful feelings about his weaknesses and inabilities. He was constantly put to the test by God. That is what he decided. That enabled him to find in his weakness a vocation within his monastic vocation. He abandoned himself into God's hands in trust.

This is what St. Augustine said about such situations. When God puts someone to the test it is not so God will learn something he had not known. It is to question the one being tested so as to bring into the light hidden qualities. The Psalmist prayed: "From hidden faults acquit me"! There are in all of us things hidden from us—not only bad but good—and they do not come out, are not brought into the open, unless one is put to the test. We do not know ourselves as our creator knows us any more than the sick know themselves in the way their physicians know them. If God were to give up putting us to the test God would be giving up the work of teaching us the truth about who we are and who and what we are called to become.

God tests us in order to teach us truth, just as the devil tests people in order to deceive them. There is a simple remedy for the temptations of the devil; one must overcome oneself interiorly and to do that is to overcome the devil even outwardly. When we learn to know ourselves, we are no longer careless and do not neglect some of the gifts God has given us. You may neglect the self you do not know, but not the self you do know.

We are told that Joseph Mary Cassant was tested every day by temptations to despair and depression. He was tempted to give up on himself, and so, on his life, because he felt depressed by all that he could not do. But in facing these temptations he discovered what he could do. He could love God by accepting himself as he was, and accept suffering as an invitation to draw close to God as Jesus had on the cross. He was capable of great love and great generosity in giving the gift of self to God and others. He was capable of showing others this opportunity. He did it by putting on real cheerfulness and charity.

What about us? Recall Abraham and Sarah, who could not have a child. When they placed their trust in God, they were given the longed for child. What does this teach us? We should not value God's gifts more than God's giving himself to us; the gifts are secondary. God is to be loved without considering whether we will receive anything or not and the reward will be God himself.

This was the insight which Joseph Mary Cassant received. We know how he used it and how it enriched and saved him as well as others. That is why he was beatified. No matter the burden and no matter the weakness, we are called to a vocation of loving. In his monastic community Joseph Mary found people glad to work to supply his physical needs and only asked he with them share his love of God. There is no greater gift one can give or receive. This is a truth God is teaching us too.

Friday

THE ONE THING NEEDED

A reflection from a conference by John Tauler

God is ready to give, we only have to ask properly. What is more, God has been at pains to tell us how to ask properly. First, we should observe what we must ask for and then how to do it. The answer is simple; we must ask whole-heartedly. The thing is to bring our hearts home, so to speak. This means calling them back from wanderings among created things, from distractions. Then, with deep humility, we must place ourselves at God's feet and ask him to be merciful and generous with us.

What we must do is knock at our Heavenly Father's heart and ask for bread. The bread we truly need is simply love for God. If one has none of this bread then one doesn't really have an appetite for any other food God can give us. However rich any other food might be we can't enjoy it or find it nourishing if we don't long to love God. That's the way this love is. It is the one thing we truly and really need.

So, let's ask God to give us this love. Let us ask God to use our prayer to teach us this love. Let's use our spiritual exercises to stimulate this love. Asking humbly is the most pleasing way of asking God for this gift. It is also the most helpful thing for us.

Whatever method of prayer a person uses is not important compared with praying to love God with all our heart. You can pray to God as divine or as Trinity or you can pray to the Passion or to the sacred wounds of the Lord. The only essential thing is to pray to love God wholly and always.

It is not given to everyone to use purely mental prayer. Some of us have to use words. If you need to do this don't be concerned. Speak to our dear Lord as lovingly and tenderly as you can. Use all the most loving words you can think of. Doing this raises up your heart, and so your love.

It is very helpful to ask the Heavenly Father to give you a foretaste of himself. Ask this in whatever form of prayer that may suit you. What you are asking is most pleasing to our Heavenly Father. It is very helpful to ask this through the Beloved Son. This way of praying is most pleasing to God.

Do not be concerned if your past sins or faults come to your mind when you set out to pray. What is important is that you persevere in prayer and that you make what you pray your own. When you find that you are really putting your heart into asking that God lead you to love him then you are already making progress.

You now know the one thing that is needful. You now know what way of praying is most pleasing to God. When you persevere in prayer you quickly discover which way of praying best suits you. Knowing this makes it easier to persevere. God tells us to knock and that if we do we will find the door opened for us. Knocking with zeal and perseverance is a kind of prize given to those who refuse to give up. We don't really know in detail all that we need. Let God show you what you need as he leads you more and more into prayer. Doing these things can lead you nowhere except to God. What else is needed?

Saturday

LEARNING NEVER TO GIVE UP ON ANYONE

A reflection from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Of all the human weaknesses that God has born for us I think the greatest was also the first in time—it was that God lay concealed in the Virgin's womb for nine months. A majesty that knows no bounds was so deeply humble as remain silent and hidden like this for such a long time. Divine Wisdom says nothing and Divine Power works nothing and these realities' presence is not betrayed by any visible sign. God was not seen in such weakness even on the Cross. There what seemed weak was seen to be strong beyond imagining when he blessed with paradise the thief dying with him and when his last breath drew a centurion to confess him as Son of God. But in the womb, it is as if he did not exist. The Eternal Word constrained itself to be utterly silent. To us who have faith the silence of the Word cries out. It calls us too to take up the discipline of silence. This nourishes, forms and strengthens the human spirit in a marvelous inner growth which is the more wholesome for being more hidden. If this were not true Solomon would not have said: "Like an open city without any encompassing walls, so is the person who can't restrain the tongue from speaking".

Consider now the meal in which we are partaking. We are to eat the one who is the Bread of Life, the Bread which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Every word which comes forth from the mouth of God is the Bread of Life, the Only-Begotten Son. And he comes forth from a virgin's womb, from one silence into the silence of a loving heart which receives him wholly and willingly. If you are wise your occupation will be to eat this bread in the presence of the Lord God, preserving like Mary all you hear from or about God and pondering it in your heart. We have been made members of Christ's Body and, precisely as that Body, we eat Christ's Body as the Bread of our lives. Grace is not lessened by use. So the more you eat the more this food will abound for you.

Recall what Scripture tells us about Rebecca when she was carrying both Jacob and Esau in her womb. It is a great lesson which the Word of God gives us as we eat him and ponder on what he has done by giving us the sign of a virgin who conceived. The two children seemed to Rebecca to be struggling in her womb, and she found this very painful. She almost wished that she had not conceived them. Now Mary's womb foreshadows that which is the Church and in whose womb there are the good and well-behaved plus the ill-tempered and undisciplined.

All are called into the Body of Christ. Do the ill-disciplined and ill-tempered annoy you so that you wish they had not been brought to term? But God can soften stony hearts to make them the hearts of children of Abraham. God softens the heart of the Church, and your own heart, so that the ache felt is born as long as it takes to re-form the two into one Christ-likeness. Those God has called are never cast away. Never despair of others, or of yourself. God will continue to work until all are beloved children of the Heavenly Father. Do not grow weary of bearing with those who cause you pain. Love them as our Heavenly Father and pray that God, and Mary mother of all who are in Christ, will lead them to the joy of God's heavenly banquet. Pray and love and trust in God, always.