

SEVENTEENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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Sunday

SEEING GOD BY FAITH

A reflection from a homily by St. Augustine

What we call the miracles of our Lord Jesus Christ lead our minds through visible things to an experience of God. We know that God is not the sort of being who can be seen with eyes and yet we know that God creates and rules the entire universe. But the amazing artistry we discover in a tiny seed is actually found everywhere. We don't bother to reflect on this fact because it is always there. What we notice are events that aren't part of the ordinary course of nature. They are works that God has reserved for particular times and places to cause us amazement and dumbfound us so that we will open our minds to God's presence and care in all events and beauties.

Governing the entire universe is certainly a greater miracle than feeding a mere five thousand people with five loaves of bread. Yet no one marvels at that governance but everyone is amazed at the second. We marvel at what is extraordinary. Think of the fact that a few seeds bring forth an entire field of wheat. Just as God multiplies a few seeds to make this field of wheat, so Christ multiplies five loaves. Christ does what God does, but in a way that opens our eyes to what God is always doing. The eyes that are opened are those of faith. The five loaves Christ multiplied were like seeds and from them comes our faith. This is much greater than a wheat field, and much more extraordinary!

A miracle is recounted to us in a sensible way in order to stimulate our minds and to engage our efforts to understand whatever happens. It makes us marvel at the God we don't see by showing us works we can see. The process raises us to the level of faith. Purified by the experience of faith we long to behold God. We know we can't do this with our ordinary eyes but we couldn't recognize God's hand working in our ordinary world except by the gift of faith. From this gift comes an ability to see what eyes cannot see. Christ performed a miracle so that the multitude he feed could see what was happening. It called forth faith. It was recorded and is read to us to call for the same faith. Faith, moreover, does for us what ordinary eyes did for the multitude. But doesn't the Lord tell us: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe"?

The people whom Jesus had healed realized they had seen a sign. "*Surely, this must be a prophet*", they said. He was in fact the Lord of the prophets, the one who fulfills what *they* prophets had proclaimed, the one who sanctifies the prophets. He was also a prophet himself, and the one whom Moses had foretold: "*I will raise up for them a prophet like yourself*", God said to Moses. The Lord Jesus is that prophet. He is the Word of God, and without God's Word no prophet can prophesy. Yes, the Word of God is a prophet and is with the prophets. Think of the people to whom God gave the gift of hearing the prophets proclaim the divine word. Now think of the fact that God has given you the gift of hearing the word of the very Word of God, the prophet of prophets.

Faith should open our hearts to gratitude and thanksgiving just as it has opened our minds to believe. That very thanksgiving is a miracle of faith that God is working in you at this very moment. Do you see God in yourself? Believe and so see and so rejoice.

Monday

WHAT GRACE WILL GOD GIVE THROUGH US?

A reflection adapted from Discourses by St. Epiphanius

It was from the “root of Jesse” that King David sprang. He was a flower that came as prepared by great graces, as we read in the Book of Ruth. From Judah and David sprang the Holy Virgin. This came about through holy parents, Joachim and Anne, prepared for by all the graces involved in the history of their people. These were brought to flower through the holiness of the Virgin Mary’s parents, as given the grace to please God by their lives and, by special grace, bring forth a daughter to receive their faith and utter devotion to doing God’s will.

Joachim and Anne clearly offered to God a sacrifice of praise. The name ‘Joachim’ means “prepared of the Lord” and the name ‘Anne’ means “grace”. These two by their holy marriage prepared the way for God’s grace, revealed to mankind in the Virgin Mary, who became by her conception the truest Temple of God. How did they bear such a fruit for God, and for all of us? It was by prayer.

Why was there such a long wait for the coming of the Messiah? Because he came through grace and this grace needed to be prepared by many previous graces. God prepared a handmaiden who was prepared to accept the call to bear God’s own Son become human. Jesus is the first born of God and is true God. O blessed Joachim and Anne! How all creation is indebted to you for accepting such a marvelous grace. This is who the one “filled with grace” is and so that from her might be born grace incarnate.

Rejoice, Joachim, for from your daughter a Son is born to us, and his name shall be “Angel of Great Counsel” and “salvation of all the world”. Let all who deny this be put to shame and cover their mouths in silence. This child is God and pure grace. Therefore, Mary is truly the Mother of God. If anyone fails to acknowledge this that person is far from God. Knowing this clearly is a gift. It is a grace we all have been given through the Gregory the Theologian’s efforts.

See how grace has abounded! “*By their fruits you shall know them*”, as Jesus himself has told us. All that is pleasing to God and all that is fruitful for human salvation and everlasting happiness is given us through the graces imparted to our ancestors in faith and trust.

Each of us has received an office that is a grace. It enables us to share the graces we have received. We are like Abraham and Moses and David and Joachim & Anne, and the apostles, and our parents; all have been channels of God’s grace and goodness. That is our call too. Receive this gift in gladness and live it in gratitude and joy. Know that God is preparing to do wonderful and saving things through you.

Tuesday

GOD MAKES THE IMPERFECT PERFECT

A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

One of the great disappointments of my life has been the painful realization that every religious group or organization I belong to is riddled with imperfection and even failure. Every group is made up of limited human beings, and I'm not the only person who has felt disillusionment at this. There are poor liturgies, uninspiring sermons, sexism, racism, disregard for the needy, abuse of power and authority and even sexual abuse. Yes, there are many who stand against such evils and strive to eliminate them. There is no excuse for such imperfect, evil, sin and even wickedness. Yet these things are found in every part of God's Church.

Jesus was well aware of this. The field sown by God's grace contains both wheat and weeds that look-like-wheat (darnel), as well as weeds that don't look like anything but weeds. But who is going to do the eliminating? Are there perfect people who can spot the imperfect and throw them out? Besides, who really determines who is bad and who is good? That is Jesus' task and he refuses to do it the way we want him to. What if Peter had been weeded out, or Paul or Augustine of Hippo or Charles de Foucauld or any of the people God has graced with repentance? Until the end of time the Church will always be a gathering of sinners, as Pope Francis not too long ago reminded us.

In the meantime, how are we supposed to live in this mixed church of so many types of sinners? The Gospel tells us to be understanding and compassionate and kind. The parable of the Sower is coupled with (e.g.) the parable of the Mustard Seed. This tiny seed grows into something so great that all sorts of birds can nest in it! Are all the birds alike? Do all sing sweetly? Do some make messes? Those who want to live in Jesus' Church have to be ready to accept all kinds of people who come seeking shelter and help from him. What he intends is that the community of the Church be life-giving for all. And he intends to create this with all the sorts of imperfect people like you and me.

It is through give and take with selfish, inconsiderate sinners like ourselves that we learn to be understanding, patient, tolerant and forgiving. But we have to let the grace of God work in us and in our living. We have to let Jesus refine and strengthen and purify us. After all, it is God's Church that is destined for the life of God's Kingdom. There "all will shine like the sun". If we want to be of that number we will have to let grace make us like Jesus.

Wednesday

COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL

By Edward Armstrong

“Jesus said: The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field which someone found” (Mt.13:44ff). In ancient peasant communities there was a difficulty about storing valuables. The poor person's safe was the earth. During turbulent times wealthy people too buried their treasures and sometimes happened or the ravages of war prevented them from returning to retrieve what they had buried. A treasure trove was uncovered every now and then, and tales about fortunate finders were retailed by wishful thinkers throughout the countryside.

In folktales the virtuous are sometimes rewarded by coming on hidden treasure, as in the rabbinic story of the good fortune which befell Abba Judah after he had generously given to the needy all he possessed, except a cow and a field. The cow stepped into a hole in the field and broke its leg, but as he tried to help it the Abba found an immense treasure.

In our society only children believe that a crock of gold is to be found at the end of a rainbow, but a fortunate farmer may still unearth treasure while plowing, as at Mildenhall in Suffolk, where magnificently ornate Roman silver dishes were found. In 1952 two heavily oxidized copper rolls were discovered at Qumran near the Dead Sea. The inscriptions recorded where treasures had been hidden but diligent search revealed nothing.

The parable of the peerless pearl is twin to the hidden treasure parable, and the two may have been told together, for parallelism is a characteristic of Hebrew style, both in short clauses and in more elaborate compositions: *“If a kingdom be divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand”*, and *“if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand”*.

The discoverer of the treasure trove was a comparatively poor man who chanced on the money. The pearl merchant came on it in the course of business and was relatively wealthy; he sold his whole stock to acquire it. One person enters into the joy of the kingdom unexpectedly, another gains it through the maturing of a lifetime's endeavor. Unlike the rich young man, when the supreme opportunity presented itself, the pearl merchant was ready to invest everything. We are given to understand that his life had been devoted to acquiring ever more perfect pearls. Each in turn was a joyful attainment. This was the climax.

So should the Christian's life be attuned to anticipation of the insights and inspirations God gives as life goes on, confident that God always has still finer gifts to give. We may not all have unexpected and glorious mystical experiences, but we should aspire after ever clearer insights. Some of them may have at least a little of the quality of that ecstasy enjoyed by Pascal, who when he lay dead, was found to have sown into his undershirt a testimony which reads: *“Certitude, perception, joy, peace, ...joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.”*

Thursday

MAKING OUR HOME A PLACE FOR JESUS

A reflection from a talk by Pope Francis

In the Gospel of Luke we hear that Jesus visited the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. He and his disciples were welcomed enthusiastically into that home. All receive him but St. Luke wishes to point especially to the work of Martha and to Mary's sitting at Jesus' feet and listening with rapt attention to all he said. She is shown to us as leaving whatever she was doing to be close to Jesus. She doesn't want to miss any of his words. When Jesus comes to visit us shouldn't everything else be put aside? Don't his presence and word come before everything else?

The Lord is always surprising us. When we truly listen to Him the clouds vanish and the doubts give place to his truth, fears give way to serenity and each of the tasks that go with the many situations of life finds its rightful place. When the Lord comes He always rearranges things, us included. In picturing Mary at Jesus' feet, Luke shows the praying attitude of believers who are able to be in the Lord's presence and listen to Him and be in tune with Him. It's about pausing during the day, recollecting oneself in silence for a few minutes, making room for the Lord who is "passing by" and finding the courage to stay somewhat aside with Him. One can then return with more serenity and efficacy to everyday things. Praising Mary for "choosing the better part" is something Jesus means for us. Let's not let ourselves be overwhelmed by the things we have to do but first of all listen to the Lord's voice so we can do the tasks that he assigns to our lives.

Then there is Martha, whom Luke says received Jesus. She certainly had the charisma of hospitality. She is wholly taken up with that service. Jesus reminds her that being concerned with many things requires ordering them so the one thing necessary gets first place. Jesus doesn't condemn the attitude of service but the breathlessness with which it is sometimes lived. We are to share Martha's concern and, following her example, we need to cultivate the sense of hospitality and fraternity as lived in our families and communities. The goal is that each person feels "at home", and especially the little ones and the poor, in our home and when they knock at our door. Nor must we miss the fact that Lazarus is there and is seeing that all the things necessary for hospitality and feeling "at home" are there for those who come.

The Gospel passage we are thinking of reminds us that wisdom of heart lies precisely in being able to combine contemplation, active service, and a certain oversight that brings all together in peace and comfort with one another. If we truly relish life lived with joy and a welcoming spirit we must keep all these realities, and the attitudes that make them real, together. We have to be able to be at the feet of Jesus and we have to be deeply concerned with hospitality, and we have to make sure that everything is in order so both these can be realized for each of us according to our needs at the time. This is what is genuinely needed if we are to live the Gospel with and for one another and for all. That is how

Friday

GOD'S CALL TO US, EACH AND ALL

A reflection from a sermon by John Henry Cardinal Newman

Our Lord Jesus Christ, after dying for our sins on the cross and ascending on high, didn't leave the world as he found it. Jesus left a blessing behind him. He left in the world what before wasn't in it—a secret home for faith and love to enjoy. And this secret home is there for us in spite of the world around us.

What is this home? It is the Church of God, our true home provided by God. There God dwells with all the angels and saints and he introduces us into it by giving us a new birth. We can even enter into it in a way that enables us to forget the troubles of the world around us.

A foretaste was provided by the Jerusalem Temple. It rose stately & beautiful on Mount Zion. It invited worshipers and led them into an outer court and away from the outward world and into God's presence. But it was confined to one place and couldn't be a home for the whole world but only for a few at a time. Our Christian temple is spiritual and invisible and can be everywhere at once. It is wherever Christians are and are praying in Jesus' Name. All may enter it and be part of God's heavenly family in a way that is just as real as was the Jerusalem Temple when one entered it.

Yes, this temple is invisible but this is a necessary condition for its being everywhere. Listen to St. Paul: "You are come to Mount Zion and to the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly of the church of the first-born whose names are written in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the just made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the New Covenant." So leave this earthly scene, Virgin Soul. No matter how attractive and winning you are aim at a higher prize, the noblest companionship.

We are able to enter into the tabernacle of God. Though we are in a fleshly body and a member of this world we have only to kneel reverently in prayer and we are at once in the society of the saints and angels. Wherever we are, we can, through God's incomprehensible mercy, in a moment bring ourselves into the midst of God's Holy Church invisible and receive secretly that aid the very thought of which is a present and perceivable blessing. Whatever may have been our past life, whether we have never trusted anyone wholly but God and God's sacred light has been with us, or whether we have trusted in the world and it has failed us, God's mercies in Christ are offered in full abundance.

Come, then, to God and ask for these mercies. Approach God as you are asked to do with all your heart and mind and strength. You will find God!

Saturday

THE APOSTOLATE IS CHRISTIAN LIVING

A reflection from a homily by St. Pope John XXIII

To Christ Jesus be the glory! The fact that the saints lived according to this maxim is one of the reasons why we admire them. And in whom do we admire this way of life more than in St. Ignatius of Loyola? It is vital that we pay careful attention to the example that St. Ignatius offers us today.

Perhaps the first thing he teaches us is not to be afraid for the Church. We say the Church of Christ is holy. This is true because the Lord sustains and guides it and not because of human efforts. It is Christ who makes the Church a fountain of life.

In some parts of the world the church is opposed or persecuted. This is at times due to the conduct of her members and not just to non-believers or anti-clericals. We have to turn to Christ when the Church is in trouble. There have been many such storms but they have always been followed by calm weather. One of the ways this is brought about is through the saints' examples of genuine St. Ignatius knew that all perfection is a result of the exercise of a genuinely Christian way of living. He saw that poverty and obedience, for example, are ways of living as Christ lived and paths we can walk to perfection. He wasn't talking about destitution when he spoke of poverty. It wasn't lack of goods or wealth he had in mind but an indifference toward what is merely human and not godly. Ordinary good things are desirable only as they lead us to salvation. We don't love them but we love all the people God has created and use goods to express this love. The same thing is true of obedience; it has to be like Christ's obedience to the Heavenly Father for the sake of the salvation of all.

How does God work this salvation? He does it through us. We teach others by our way of living, by our works of charity, by our concern for the social welfare of all, by our efforts to build up our societies and nations so they embody a civilization of love. What we do should be seen to build up and ennoble human life and ways of living.

What not all see is that what makes all of this a reality is making our living together an instrument for sanctification. We are to seek to sanctify our families, our communities, our civic and social order, our country and the Church. To difficulties and crises, we must respond with the "calm of the Gospel". There will always be difficulties and opposition, both from the failures of Christians to live sanctification and from the hatred of those who misunderstand Christ's message of love.

Let opponents rage! Continue to bless the name of the Lord Jesus! Continue to imitate and bless the saints! To Jesus Christ be glory and honor and blessing! This is the message of St. Ignatius, and the message of the Gospel and of Jesus. Keep it in mind that when you sanctify your living and acting in the ways possible in your circumstances you are both an apologist and an apostle of Jesus Christ!