

TWENTY-SECOND WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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Sunday

THE REAL HEART OF THE MATTER

A reflection inspired by a retreat conference of Fr. Ronald Knox

Why did the Lord want to come to earth as a Jew, and then spend so much time and effort criticizing the observance of the customs that most perceived as proper signs of being Jewish? It was, I think, because he saw one primary failing as characteristic of the “lost of the House of Israel” to whom he had been primarily sent. They were lost because the way they observed the prescriptions of the Law treated them as values in themselves. Usually we interpret this as critiquing all religious practice done for the sake of appearances. Yet the actual failing is common to the whole human race. How much of your life is dominated by a feeling that you have to keep up appearances and need to do what people expect? Are we better than the Pharisees Jesus took to task or just like them?

Put yourself for a moment in Jesus’ place when the Pharisees criticize him for letting his disciples ignore some of Israel’s many purity regulations. Today we still hear concern about washing one’s hands before eating. How would you reply? In effect, Jesus reminds his critics that purity is important only as it keeps one’s heart fixed on God and entrusts all one’s mind and heart and life to God. Yes, but isn’t that what one does in observing purity regulations? God gave them to us through our ancestors and sages and we do them, whether or not we see a deeper meaning in them, simply to obey God in every way and time and place!

But, Jesus adds, you are forgetting things like justice; i.e., like treating others as you want people to treat you—respecting and caring for them and treating them fairly. Are you praying to cover up the fact you are robbing widows of the little they have to live on? You see, actually you often treat religious customs as though they were more important than justice. God has not only called you to love him with all your mind and heart and life but also to love your neighbors, and love them as God loves them. Unless your religious customs help you do this in deed and not just in thought you are not loving God but pretending to love God while you spend your time and energy on trying to build up yourself and make yourself more important socially. Do you want others to honor you or do you seek your honor from God? You seem to use a pretended honoring of God as a means to get honor from other people.

We are as God sees us. What’s wrong about seeking “human respect” is that it gets us into the habit of asking, “What will others think?” and forgetting to ask, “What will God think?” We are commanded to help one another. That means helping one another put God first and showing love for one another in ways that helps them too put God first. As you observe customs of courtesy and mutual respect do you do this in ways that help all concerned recall God’s love for us and our need to love God by loving each other so that we all go steadily toward God and God’s Kingdom?

Monday

KEEP YOUR EYES FIXED ON JESUS!

A reflection by Origen of Alexandria

“Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and his reputation spread throughout the countryside. He taught in their synagogues and everyone sang his praises.” When we read about Jesus teaching in the synagogues of Galilee and everyone praising him, we must be careful not to look at those who heard him as uniquely privileged and at ourselves as deprived. If Scripture proclaims the truth, it was not only to the Jewish congregations of his own generation that our Lord spoke; he still speaks and to us. We are assembled here today to hear him. We know he speaks not only to us but to other congregations as well. Throughout the world Jesus comes looking for instruments through whom he can continue to teach and save. Pray that each of us may be such an instrument. Pray that Jesus will find you and me ready and fit to sing his praises and proclaim the Good News of his coming as Savior.

“Then Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day as was his custom. When he stood up to read they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling it he found the place where it is written: “The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me...” It was no coincidence, but in accordance with the plan of divine providence, that Jesus unrolled the scroll and found in it this chapter prophesying about him. After all, it is written, “not a single sparrow will fall to the ground without your Father’s permission”, and the apostles were told that every hair on their heads had been counted; we can be sure indeed that it was not by chance that the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was produced rather than some other, and that this precise passage was found and used to speak of the mystery of Christ: *“The Spirit of the Lord has been given me, for He has anointed me”*.

When Jesus had read this prophesy *“he rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed upon him”!* Here too, in this synagogue, in this present assembly, you all can at this very moment fix your eyes upon your Savior—if you wish to! Whenever you direct your inward gaze toward wisdom and truth and the contemplation of God’s only Son, then your eyes are fixed on Jesus.

Blessed is the congregation of which it can be said “all eyes are fixed upon Him”! How we long for our own assembly to deserve to have this said of it. Let’s all of us—men and women, young and old, faithful and enquirers—turn our eyes toward Jesus. Let’s turn not only the eyes of our bodies but those of our souls to Jesus!

Why? From Jesus comes the light that enlightens everyone whom God calls. The radiance of Jesus’ face becomes a radiance within us, one that shows itself in the love that shines from them and onto all we meet. It lets us proclaim the Good News of this love and lets us show the world how Jesus’ love and wisdom can transform a person. It is through transforming each of us that God will transform the world. We have been called to do a beautiful thing, and doing it makes us beautiful with the same beauty that shines from Christ Jesus.

Tuesday

PUTTING CHARITY FIRST

An instruction by St. Vincent de Paul

The poor often seem rough and unrefined. But who are we to judge from external appearances or in terms of mental gifts or whatever? If you consider them to be persons in need and see them in the light of faith you will realize that you are dealing with the Son of God. He chose to be poor, and in his passion we are told that he almost lost the appearance of a human being. He was thought a fool by Gentile and by Jews. His mission, however, was like ours, to preach to the poor. He says, The Heavenly Father sent me to preach the good news to the poor. Should we have the same spirit Christ did? Shouldn't we imitate Christ? We must take care of the poor, console them, help them, and support their cause.

Christ willed to be born poor and chose for himself disciples who were poor. He made himself the servant of the poor and even shared their poverty. He went so far as to say that he would consider every deed which either helps or harms the poor as to for or against himself. You see how God loves the poor. God also loves those who love the poor. When you hold another dear you also have a like affection for anyone who loves or serves the one you love.

We hope that God will love us for the sake of the poor whom we love. So when we are with the poor and needy we try to understand them and where they come from, as we say. We sympathize with them and do it so completely that we echo St. Paul's words, "I have become all things for all". We must let ourselves be stirred by our neighbor's worries and distress. We must beg God to pour into our hearts feelings of pity and compassion and to do this again and again.

It is our duty to prefer the service of those in need to everything else. We must offer help as quickly as possible. If someone requires medicine, or whatever other help, during prayer time then we do not become upset or feel guilty if we interrupt our prayer to serve them. God is not neglected but served if you leave such things to serve him in one in need. One work of love for God is interrupted so another can be carried out. When you leave prayer to serve one in need you are doing this for Christ. He himself tells us so.

Charity is more important than any rule. All rules must lead to and support charity. We must do whatever charity commands. So we must serve the needy with great devotion. This holds especially for beggars and outcasts. These people have been sent to us and we are to treat them as if they were our masters and patrons. Then we truly serve Christ and God. Never ignore another's need. If you do you ignore Christ.

Wednesday

PRAYER AND BUSYNESS

Based on a reflection by Carroll Stuhlmueller

The story of Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law takes us to a very busy time in Jesus ministry. It is perhaps a consolation to us that Jesus had to cope with the same sort of constant demands that we do all too often. It is consoling to know that God plunged into our humanity and our human condition so far as to experience all that seems so difficult for us, even a horrible death. The Letter of the Hebrews says: "He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every way .. that he might be a merciful high priest". If we take such statements from Holy Scripture literally, and there is no reason not to, there is nothing too ugly for Jesus to undergo, except for sin.

What embarrasses you most? Probably, for many, it is their temptations. They can be harder to discuss than any action. But God, and Jesus, knows them all. Nothing that disturbs us is closed to his compassionate understanding and love. God works in us, and even in our imaginations and in the longings we fear, to help us bring salvation to our human brothers and sisters. He does it especially through our prayer.

Think of the prophet Samuel, given away by his mother when he was only three, and clinging to the priest Heli as his father. When he hears an unknown voice in the night he "runs" to Heli, not once by three times. Heli treats him with great gentleness. So did God as Samuel learned to listen and to speak to God. Through Samuel God worked to change the history of Israel.

Jesus shows endless compassion. In today's Gospel we hear about Peter's mother-in-law. He has been preaching but immediately comes to her when he hears she is down with a fever. He heals her. Of course, she is swept up right away in the household need for a noon meal. Jesus has a break, but once the Sabbath rest ends at sundown, the house is mobbed by people seeking to be healed, physically and psychically and spiritually.

It was a very full day. How does Jesus respond? Early in the morning, before the sun has risen, he goes off to a place of solitude for prayer. We often rush from one thing to another. Jesus shows us by example how to center our day on God. He gets up before dawn to pray; it is a simple way to be sure that prayer forms the focus of the day. It takes effort but it brings one into the divine presence and invites God to spill into every part of one's life and day the inner light that the light of the sun reminds us of. And the place of prayer is important. He goes to a place where he can be alone with the Heavenly Father. He has nothing to distract him from their conversations. Humanly speaking, it seems to be in this way that he confirms his understanding of what he is to do for God.

Let us ask God to lead us into solitude where we can utter what is in our hearts, even what we fear or ashamed of. We will be in the presence of the One who loves us above all others. Jesus has taught us how to pray and in what circumstances to pray. He lives with God all day but renews and refreshes his awareness of God's presence before he is swept up in the demands the day and its work will make on Him. Help us, Lord, to pray like Jesus so that we may also love and serve as Jesus did, and do everything in your presence.

Thursday

PREPARING FOR A GREAT ADVENTURE

A reflection based on a text by Fr. Gerald Vann

Jesus was standing by the Sea of Galilee with a crowd pressing around him to listen to the Word of God. He noticed two boats close at hand; the fishermen were washing their nets. Before Jesus came along and asked to use the boat, the fishermen had spent a night in fruitless effort. Maybe they were they were getting ready to go home and rest. But they agreed, and even went along to listen; they knew that sound carries over water and that people couldn't block one another's view or hearing if Jesus used the boat as his platform.

You wouldn't think this was the dramatic introduction to a vocation story. But it is every bit as fascinating as the story of Isaiah's call to be a prophet, which is the topic of the first reading at this Sunday's Eucharist. It certainly doesn't sound as exciting as Paul's reminder of how the resurrected Jesus suddenly appeared to him. But think of what our Lord said to Simon after he finished speaking: Put out into deeper water and lower your nets for a catch!

These are words Jesus addresses to us right now. If you are tempted to think of your faith or its practice as something added to the ordinary business of living then you will miss the adventure that is a life of faith. Jesus says to us too: I am going to teach you to catch people. That's our vocation!

So faith isn't a mere addition to life but the door into an entirely new dimension of life and reality. The temptation is to live on the surface of life, without bothering our heads about anything deeper or higher. That means failing to live fully. So Jesus calls us: Go out over your head!

The first time to dive into the sea it can be a frightening experience but once you are in and swimming the fright vanishes and you enjoy a thrill, a sense of freedom in a strange element suddenly become friendly, bearing you up in spite of its immensity. That is what religion is meant to be like. It means knowing the Presence, the Love, that is in and all around all things. It means plunging into the Divine Life like a diver plunges into the sea. That is what our Lord calls us to when he invited us to come to him and find life, and a more abundant life.

We are called to leave behind the narrowness of self and its ordinary shallowness. We move into the immensity of God's call to love others in Jesus' way. So he says: Don't be afraid. His hand is always there to support us—as it was to Simon Peter when he answered Jesus' call to walk on the waters. In today's Gospel he responds to Jesus' directions: If you say so Master I will let down the net. And something marvelous happened that stupefied him.

Jesus calls us to things we seem wholly unprepared to do. He says, Follow me and I will make you People Catchers! Fish they understood, but this was way over their heads, and perhaps yours and mine. Nobody expects an adventure to involve nothing but effortless ease. Jesus invites us to the greatest adventure of all. Yet, through God's mercy, it will reveal to us life in a fullness we had never imagined—if we answer his call. You can't yet see either the cost or the reward. You can trust in Jesus! He never fails us.

Friday

THE ESSENTIAL WORK THAT IS PATIENCE

A reflection from On Pastoral Care by St. Pope Gregory the Great

All of us are sick, at least spiritually, and we need to be helped to learn patience. We need to think, for instance, of how great were the evils our Redeemer had to bear at the hands of the very beings he had created out of love. Think of the horrible insults and criticisms he had to bear. How many slaps did he receive from scoffers? Yet what he was doing was snatching from the power of the ancient enemy the souls of those he held captive. We have to bear the pain of this process and so we must look to Our Lord for an example of patience.

The Lord silently endured scourging as a way to set us free. He cleanses us with the water of salvation but its power comes from the love that didn't screen his own face from the spittle of treacherous people. He freed us by the mediation of his torments so that we would not have to bear eternal torment. He endured blows to free us for everlasting honor enjoyed amid the choirs of angels. He offered his own head to bear a crown of thorns and didn't shrink even from this to free us. He drank bitter gall so that we might be inebriated with the wine of everlasting sweetness.

Think of the patience that enabled him to endure mocking adoration. He held his peace and in doing it he adored the Heavenly Father for us. Though he was equal to the Father in divinity and was life itself, he was willing to pass through death that he might prepare us for everlasting life and actually bring us to it. We were dead in spirit but by his patience we have been brought to life.

Why do we think it so difficult when he have to bear illness and pain. Aren't these simply punishments that God gives us by way of discipline? We have done evil and deserve what we get. But God himself was willing to bear the same for us when he didn't deserve it at all. If God endured such great evils, and it was as though they were a response to his good deeds on our behalf, then how could we be ungrateful? If we are grateful, how can we fail to patiently bear all that will bring us to our redeemer and eternal lover?

Everyone who would proclaim the Gospel, as our God has called us to, must do so by deeds more than by words. We must do this by our righteous way of life. When we do this we leave footprints that others may follow, and even walk in. If we are to do this then we have to be awakened and stirred up by what we bear for the sake of others and following the example of Christ. If the head languishes the members of the body have neither vigor nor direction. Christ never languished and has always been ready to bear whatever might be necessary to lead us to the Heavenly Father and eternal salvation.

We can only follow in these footsteps if we allow ourselves to be corrected and set in order and on the right path. We should regard all we suffer as only penance done to make us ready to proclaim in our deeds the saving love of our God. We have to lead one another in patience if we are to do what God calls us to do. Let us, then, pray with all our heart to receive the grace by which we may become patient as the Lord was. That is what we can show daily in all we do, and especially in all we suffer.

Saturday

CHRIST'S INCARNATION IN MARY & IN US

A reflection based on a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

St. Paul knew full well that the flesh of itself won't get us anywhere apart from the Spirit. It is what gives life. So St. Paul refuses to know Christ simply according to the flesh. Why? He wants to give himself wholly and with the greatest zeal to the life-giving Spirit.

It seems that Mary also had a deep understanding of all this. She longs for all to love the beloved Fruit of her womb. Jesus is the object of her love and prayers. But she doesn't speak of him simply according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. It is as though she were saying, "*Even though I have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now I know him in that way no longer*". Mary longs to see her only begotten son formed in all the children God has given her through Jesus.

All are begotten and brought forth through the Word of Truth. Nevertheless, Mary also brings them forth daily in her loving and devoted care. She longs for them to attain the perfect maturity we see in Christ. This is the full measure of the richness of that Son of hers whom she once bore and goes on bearing in all his incarnations in us. It was the fruit of eternal joy whom she brought forth.

In Ecclesiastes wisdom, speaking as Mary, says: "*I am the mother of fair love and of fear and of knowledge and of holy hope*". Who is your son, O virgin of virgins? Is this son your beloved, O fairest of women? Yes, this is my beloved, this is my son, O Daughters of Jerusalem. My beloved Son is fair love itself. He is fear, and hope and knowledge in the persons who are born of him. He is not only the object of our love, our fear, our knowledge and our hope, more He is the One who works all these things in us.

We thus become like so many members of a single body. Through the virtues as though through many members of a single body, Jesus takes form within us. Christ will be perfectly formed in you—to the extent that it is possible in this life—as his Truth finds full expression in and through your thoughts, words & deeds.

First, you must recognize that He has and is the Truth. Having recognized this truth, we must glorify him through our reverential fear and hope. And lest this hope be disappointed the charity of God must be poured out into our hearts. Then only is Christ fully formed in you.

This is what Mary has always longed for. This is a fulfillment of her vocation. It is only through our formation in love that Christ is fully formed within us all. That is what we are to pray for daily, with Mary and with all God's saints.